

LOVE: the Pilgrim.



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LOVE, THE PILGRIM.

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HURST & BLACKETT, 13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET

"LOVE, THE PILGRIM

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

AUTHOR OF

"QUEENIE," "ORANGE LILY," "A JEWEL OF A GIRL,"
"MY LOVE, SHE'S BUT A LASSIE,"
&c., &c.

"Every day a pilgrim blindfold,
When the night and morning meet,
Entereth the slumbering city,
Stealeth down the silent street;
Ling'reth round some battered doorway,
Leaves, unblest, some portal grand,
And the walls where sleep the children
Touched with his warm young hand.
Love is passing! love is passing!
Passing while ye lie asleep."

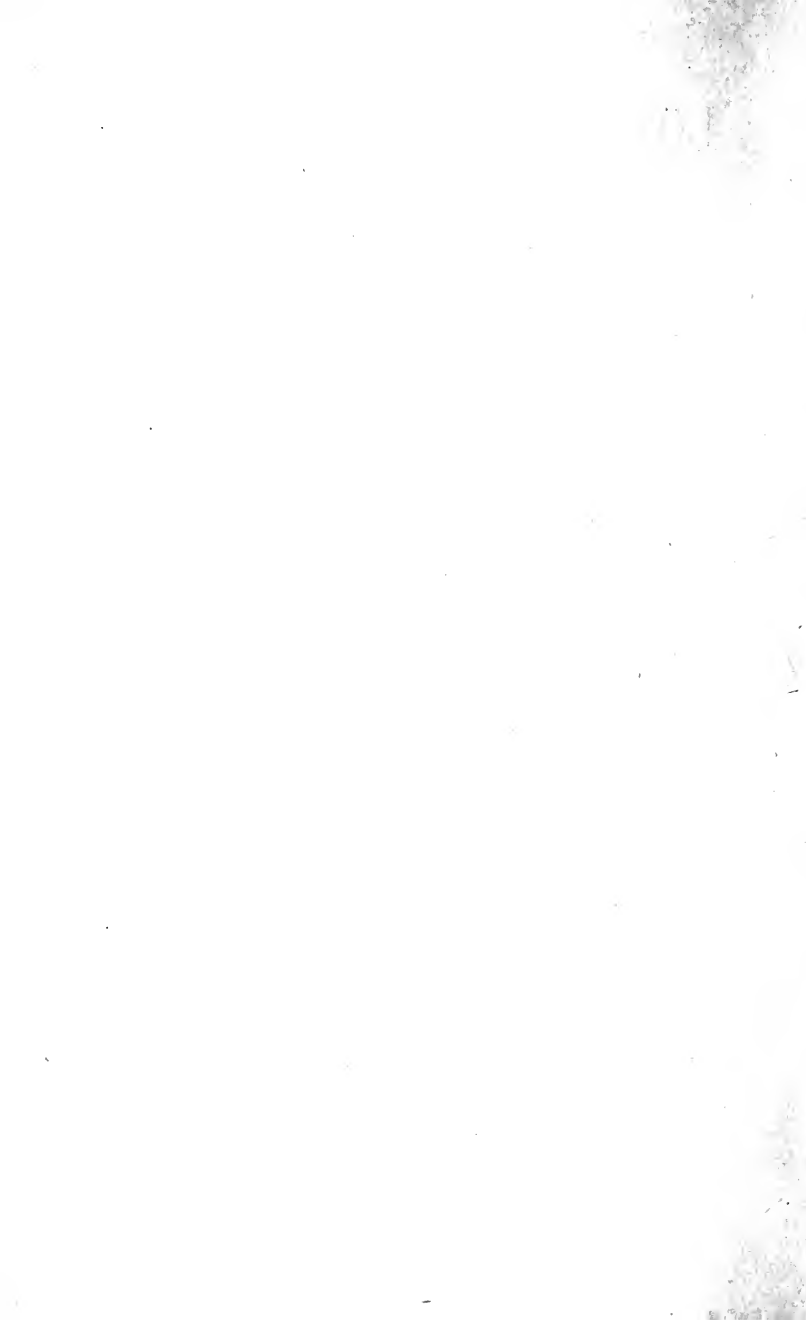
HAMILTON AIDE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1886.

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LOVE, THE PILGRIM.

CHAPTER I.

AVE MARIA!

THE church-clocks in Westcliff were striking five one Christmas evening. These watchmen of day and night sounded their message to the busy world below from out of a thick darkness of sea-fog and night, that hid not only spires and towers, but also houses, footpaths, and even passers-by from human sight. It was as if Egypt's three days' plague had come back on earth. No star of Bethlehem, or any other candle

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of heaven, could be seen this night. The street-lamps showed only a faint, ghostly glimmer, like farthing rushlights. The smoke of the town, pressed down by the mist, filled the nostrils and lungs of any persons abroad with a choking atmosphere. It was as dismal a Christmas as could be remembered.

But inside the Roman Catholic church of Westcliff was a very different scene. Vespers had begun, and the high-altar was a blaze of lights, occasionally veiled by incense fumes. From screened galleries came the chanting of sweet voices, in high relief against the grandly solemn background of sound of the organ. The whole effect of the Christmas service was the more impressive and subduing to the senses by contrast with the outside gloom.

So thought, at least, one spectator there—a man who watched all with the keen interest of one somewhat a stranger to

the scene, to whom custom had staled none of its sights and sounds.

‘I like the beautiful expressions they use towards the Virgin Mary,’ he said to himself. ‘House of gold! Mystical Rose! Star of the morning! . . . Star of the sea!’

Then he chuckled in himself with quiet humour, remembering the faint horror of the evangelistic and old-fashioned relatives with whom he was staying, on hearing whither he had been bound this evening.

‘Not to the club?—even *that* would have been better. People generally used to think it right to keep their Christmas Day together.’ So it had been hinted to him, neither austere nor sourly, yet with a sort of regretfully righteous shaking of the head over the falling-off of good old customs ‘in these days.’ He had, however, mutely made it felt, without a word of argument—was it by the gently weary

expression of face with which he had looked momentarily out of the window, stroking his moustache (a rarely-seen sight in that clean-shaven or feminine household), or by the sigh changed to a smothered yawn—that a man who has been roaming the world must not be *too* much expected to conform in these little matters. Then he had answered, with sweet reasonableness, that he would be back for dinner and the evening. (The roast-beef, plum-pudding, and all that now drearily, no longer cheerily, reminded him he and these good people were but the last odd members of a once happy family circle.) So, without more opposition, Christopher Kenyon had gone on his way.

Most men would have done the same. But it was slightly peculiar in him that he never so much seemed to *take* his way, or perhaps cared to have it, as that he drifted thereunto. He would give in to

others' small foibles and tiresome habits with most praiseworthy kindness and a humorous resignation, although of all things in life he dreaded—hated—could hardly endure being *bored*! But in larger affairs all the passionate vehemence of people who were altogether set on influencing him—and that as often for his own good as theirs—and knew only his good-humour and almost womanish tenderness in some ways, was absolutely vain.

It was not, he used to aver, that they could not stir him because his mind was as a rock, but because it was *as a fluid*. Their arguments seemed never able to take a grip on his intelligence, nor the latter to be arrested long by them. Then such persons were angry, and said his heart beneath the pleasant surface was hard as the hardest kernel from selfishness. He knew their opinion, and was grieved; but seemed unable to explain himself further. He

knew they meant the best towards him. If they would only believe he told them the truth about himself; for, indeed, no cleverest logic nor array of facts could hold him from drifting towards what vaguely seemed to be his fate, not his happiness.

Nobody did believe him. So clever a man, such a brain, so well informed—nonsense!

Few would have entered into his feelings of disgusted effort that morning, as of one told it was a duty to eat, and then who tried duly to receive water-gruel administered with a leaden spoon. It was during a long evangelistic sermon he had attended in kindness towards his old relations; now what a refreshment and consolation to him was the present service. And yet he was quite Protestant in opinion—only refined and sensual in tastes. Neither would they have understood the veritable pain that Christmas days now gave him in heart.

The dreary efforts to be jolly: the many 'happy returns of the day'—which only made him muse with melancholy that life was dismal enough, so why need he want much more of it? He was so handsome; so agreeable; so gentle! Who would have believed his so-called selfish heart ached at the terrible efforts to be 'gay' of most victims of habit on this anniversary? Relatives pretending to join hands in a circle where he remembered only too well the gaps. His two sisters, now passed from his ken, the 'dear dead women' who had best understood him of all living beings; so pretty and graceful, too, and he liked pretty women even as such only (though *they* had been far more) with a degree of weakness beyond that of most men.

'I am told this world is governed for the best in these matters,' he now sighed to himself. 'I can't believe it is—can only vaguely try to hope it *may be*. But,

in truth, it all seems to me to be topsy-turveydom. For instance, I needed my sisters. I am a worse man by far since my brother died, who was my stronger, better self, and yet I am told to believe (which is to feel) it is all for our ultimate good. Heigh-ho !'

Very irreligious, some may say. After all, this so-called weak man only said out to himself what others felt; which, if crystal-lising into thought, they virtually gulped down again, and still felt and felt. It is far better to face such problems and fight them, and be beaten maybe to the ground, and rise a truer Christian or an honest unbeliever.

'But I don't fight them. I only look them round and round curiously,' thought Kit Kenyon, sighing to himself.

No pride in him. Yet the man was called conceited, and vain of his looks and qualities, by many other men.

‘Ave Maria . . . !’

Kenyon felt desolate and lonely in the world this Christmas evening. A man feels so more on coming back to England after long absence, and having no one left of the best-beloved, familiar faces to welcome him. There were no smiles for himself alone; no ears always ready to hear what *he* had to say. He was looking round vaguely at the stranger faces, and his eyes had wandered to the Christmas crib at the right side of the entrance near where he sat. There his gaze was arrested.

A young girl was kneeling near the door, with such a happy dreaming expression on her face, that it was no wonder if, having seen it once, one should try to steal a second glance at her. Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes raised to the representation before her, but were seeing far beyond it, away, away into happy, vague regions of fancy. Before

her was the crib, railed in to prevent the faithful approaching too near in adoration. It was the usual scene of the stable—the Virgin holding the Babe on her knees; the three magi adoring, and a horned head or two of cows at either side. Above was a dark-blue transparency of night-sky; a twinkling star; and a tiny angel hovering from a wire. It was pretty but childish. Yet, seeing that girlish face, Kenyon felt half ashamed of his own amused late cynicism when wondering how the crib would look a month hence—thrust into a corner; rolled up anyhow; the reverse of the canvas seen; and the holy stable housing church-mice, spiders, and dust till next year.

But to young Hester kneeling there, the pictured scenery had so appealed to her imagination, that she was wrapped in blissful worship, not of the actual objects before her, but of all they suggested. She

was away in Palestine seeing the shepherds out on the hills in a starry night (all remembrance of Westcliff and the fog forgotten). The music in her ears was from the heavenly spheres at that moment; the chanting was that of angels' voices, while their forms, lo there! were floating down from the dark-blue sky—'as they came, we know they came!' So her fancy had, as it were, appealed to her mind, which had confirmed her flight of thought.

And now she was in the stable among the gentle beasts, and realised before her eyes no mimic Babe or Virgin Mother of wood or canvas, but the most beautiful *thought* that ever was whispered to mind of man. The thought of the God-child come down to earth; living, softly breathing on a mother's lap; the glorious life just beginning, like an opening flower.

'*Ave Maria!*'

Highly-strung persons are conscious

sometimes by a peculiar, uneasy feeling of when they are looked at long and earnestly. Hester felt constrained to look round, she knew not why; and met a pair of dark eyes watching her from a seat close by. As if roused from a trance, she gazed back dreamily for a second or so; then, almost immediately recovering herself, returned to her devotions. She had seen a very handsome man's face, a bronzed face, as of one come of late from hot, tropical lands; and, set in this face, were those dark, glowing eyes that had met hers with momentary intentness; for it had been, indeed, two moments, —no more.

That was all she had seen.

Hester sought to watch the crib once more, and to fancy herself back into the former beatitude befitting this Christmas night; but the subtle spell was dissolved. So she tried to pray with bent head. She

tried most devoutly, and succeeded at first; but—but——

Now a splendidly-robed procession is passing down the aisle. The bishop in gold vestments, with his chaplain gorgeously arrayed, and all the other priests are coming down to ‘visit the infant Jesus’ in his crib. Nearer and nearer. Surely, young Hester thinks, she might look just once more round. Stolenwise. The little acolytes swung their thuribles, a cloud of incense filled the space around. And through that cloud for one brief instant Hester once more met the dark eyes again watching her. Then the white incense-fumes intervened; she buried her shamed face in her hands and saw the unknown, no more.

Ave Maria . . . !

Such a terrible night as it was, when all the worshippers streamed out. Yet Hester stopped short at the nearest corner to

give a penny to a poor beggar-woman who stood under a lamp, the light shining on her wretchedly damp forlornness.

‘Oh! miss—it is such a bad night to stop; best hurry back to your aunt,’ respectfully murmured the servant-maid with her.

A few minutes later, out came Christopher Kenyon. No thought had he of stopping for the beggar. He shook his head, raising his collar to his ears, and hardening his heart hurried on. The woman had not spoken, but given a mute wistful look. Down two streets, half-way across a square he hurried; then, by fits and starts, his steps slackened. Why had that woman looked at him so? It was of no use trying—he could not feel happy to-night. It was too bad! Yes, her face *would* haunt him—plague upon it, such an awful night to go back that long way!

Yes, Christopher Kenyon was trudging

now back along the square and the two streets, shivering like an Eastern with cold, and striving to pierce the fog and darkness with his eyes. The beggar would be gone, of course! Just like his luck, and he must feel remorseful for many an evening, remembering the mute misery of her face. No!—there she was!

He crossed the street rather miserably, trying to pick his steps, although up to the ankles in mud, and gave the woman abruptly half-a-crown. The mud and the extra money seemed to himself a just punishment for his late hard-heartedness.

The beggar, an Irishwoman, stood amazed a second, recognising him again. Then she broke out in voluble blessings.

‘Might the blessed Mary and all the holy saints be good to him many and many a long day, for the generous heart he had shown to her this night!’

‘It is such a gruesome farce trying to

be happy oneself at Christmas, once childhood has fled. One ought only to try to make others happy, I believe ; there might be some success there,' thought Kenyon, as he once more turned down the two streets already passed and re-passed, pressing his hat lower down and pulling his coat higher up than ever.

He was not sorry to have lightened his purse and his conscience, but wished he had done so sooner. How dreary sea-fogs were ! He would leave Westcliff next week for somewhere else—anywhere.

CHAPTER II.

‘CANST THOU SPEAK GREEK?’

EASTER had come, an early one that year. And with Easter, and longer days and Lent-lilies blowing shyly in bleak hedge-rows, came also an outburst of the mild festivities at Westcliff after the still season and penitential appearances of Lent.

Westcliff lay, as its name denoted, on the western coast. It was a pretty town, sought by invalids and old Indians for its mild climate; but it was not a large town, and at times could be dull—very dull. So thought mere sojourners in its walls, at

least—of whom was the girl already seen at Christmas vespers. But just at present the inhabitants all met each other once a day at least, and stopped to say, ‘Oh, are you going to Mrs. Here’s or Lady There’s this week? Westcliff is really *quite gay*.’

At one of these gaieties, a ‘small and early’ dance, beginning at eight and ending at midnight, but which really was as late as any other, and numbered all the ‘best’ people in the town, Hester Armytage was standing against the wall.

‘Dear child, it quite vexes me, I declare, to see you standing there; you should be *dancing*!—yes, whirling round with the rest and among the best!’ whispered a large, pleasant-looking matron to her with hearty, kindly emphasis.

‘Never mind, Aunt Bessie. How can you or I expect it? We are strangers in the land, and look round now; there are,

at least, twenty forlorn maidens to every dozen of men.'

There was certainly a treble row of girls, mostly pretty, young, and pleasant, standing before Hester partnerless. They were all striving by various little wiles to move in front of their neighbours, to be seen, to be chosen by their swains. Hester was behind them all, perfectly aware of the little stratagems around her, not blaming these (she was too much a woman for that), but simply indifferent to the prizes coveted, even superbly disdainful of them in her heart.

Her aunt, Mrs. Armytage, disdained no one. She had too warm a sympathy for all of human-kind, felt with their joys and troubles. She liked everyone around her, more—or less. And if she truly disliked or despised anybody, which was rare, she held her peace about them simply, or might with close observation be seen be-

taking herself away from their neighbourhood with wonderful nimbleness and dexterous quietness in one of her size. It really grieved her kind heart now to see her charge *not* enjoying herself, so she fancied. This in spite of Hester's assurances that she did *not* care; that she was well enough pleased.

‘It all comes of having only an old vagrant of an aunt to look after your interests!’ she sighed, with a merry twinkle in her eye. ‘You see, I’ve been in Westcliff such a short time, and been out so little since then. But, if we were in India, now, instead of here, *ah*——!’

Hester smiled back and held her head up, conscious of being the ‘tallest deer in all the herd’ around. She could overlook almost all round her, and had a well-bred head beautifully placed on a very white neck. Her shoulders, slightly drooping, were unusually broad, her waist wonder-

fully, naturally slender. Her whole figure and appearance, one of the country-bred young Westcliff beaux had described as 'game-looking.' Why was she not more sought out, then? Simply because, though several of the youths watched her with admiring eyes, they were perpetually reminded by conscience, and their mothers and sisters, of the environing, *really* native Westcliff girls whose parents had dined them, given afternoon teas, garden-parties, and so forth. Duty required that so many waltzes should pay back these little civilities.

Hester knew all this perfectly well, being sensible. A bolder-minded damsel, with such beauty, might have spread havoc among the Westcliff proprieties, and caused a rebellion against these petty by-laws. Hester hardly gave such a poor victory a thought. Like Gallio, she cared for none of these things. The girl came

from a beautiful and most happy nest of a home, up by the lakes of the north country. There she had been born and bred. Twice or three times she had sipped brief draughts of London pleasures, in visits delightful to remember afterwards in the lovely solitudes she inhabited.

Short as these visits had been, she was vaguely looked on in Westcliff as a London young lady, and therefore conceited, no doubt, and proud. Poor Hester gave herself no airs: she, a very child of Nature! Only she ardently loved what was pleasure to her, and here felt disappointed. The good youths who led her out to dance all asked her how long she had been in Westcliff; and how she liked it; and would she stay some time? If she began a few topics of more general interest than the weather or the local cricket, they looked alarmed, and murmured that Westcliff did not 'go in' for these sort of clever subjects.

‘Aunt Bessie, it is terrible for a girl to be condemned as “clever” in this sort of town, and it is especially hard when one feels so innocent of the guilt,’ murmured the girl, in an amused, half-veiled voice.

‘It is, dear. It’s a positive stigma in Westcliff; and, though you may have latent possibilities that way, I never found you offensively learned. I really have thought at times you were quite a pleasant goose—just a slight improvement on an old goose like me.’

Mrs. Armytage’s warmth of manner and drollery of quiet humour made her a most pleasant duenna; perhaps too sympathetic to be worldly-wise. She felt with Hester now, like any girl-friend, though she had only lately seen her niece again after her own long expatriation in India. She knew Hester’s feet were dancing secretly to the music, that the girl’s eyes were watching the dancers with a feeling, ‘How

I could enjoy myself, *if*——’ Just so had Bessie felt, not so many years ago. And, eying her charge lovingly, the kind soul knew also there were very few among the Westcliff men there whom Hester, ‘cared two straws to dance with; and, I declare, I agree with the child,’ thought the chaperon to herself. ‘It is hard at her age, and with her face, to be a wall-flower—dear, dear, we’ll hope it’s *good for her!*’

This was Mrs. Armytage’s way, with a silent laugh, of trusting that some good might be deduced from disagreeable circumstances. She was practically a most religious woman, always ‘visiting the fatherless and the widow in their affliction’ with cheering consolation; but she seldom talked about religion. Although quite ready to grant that many young girls (and awkward youths, too) are apt to think themselves of too much importance in the world, so that her temporary neglect was

probably beneficial to Hester,—who was a petted orphan, adored in her northern home by her old grandparents,—nevertheless, resisting the blandishments of a line of dowagers smiling and nodding to her, for she was a general favourite, Mrs. Armytage's small merry eyes were roving round the room, trying to relieve the young girl from her (perhaps) salutary chastisement.

Hester, herself, has not yet been described in appearance. The girl had an oval face, with a white, low brow, broad and full over the eyes. It was a peculiarly imaginative face, though she had shown no especial powers of intellect in learning nor genius in painting, music, or so forth. At times she had a strange look of calm resolution—strange, only because of the great gentleness of her eyes and whole expression, which showed hers would be a resistance of endurance, not opposition.

Hester's golden-brown hair was very silky, slightly waved, and flecked with chestnut lights. She wore it slightly brushed back and loosely coiled, suggesting at times the thought how lovely it would look, *if* it would but fall down upon her shoulders. But Hester's eyes were her chief beauty. They were only bluish-grey eyes, slightly touched with orange spots on close inspection, but large, almond-shaped, and so softly, deeply liquid. Her eye-lashes and brows were far darker than her hair, and the eye-brows, which were strongly pencilled and long, drooped a little on the temples as if with a premonition of sadness. A long nose, with a slight rise, and delicate nostrils. A mouth, of which the short upper lip would quiver and move (as indeed did her eyebrows) with every shade of passing emotion; while the lower one was more full and warmly rosy, as if 'a bee had newly stung it.'

Hester's exquisitely clear complexion was rather pale. But then—in a moment—at the least gladness, surprise, or slight annoyance, it would flush with a quick, vivid, yet as easily fading colour. The blue veins on her temples were very apparent. A seer of such signs, or prophetess, might easily have traced her supposed future fate there. And at moments two veins could be seen, joining like a V, in the middle of her white forehead. Was it a mark she was fated to remain vowed to virginity all her days, or to be a victim? Aunt Bessie had noticed the sign, and they had laughingly disputed over it. The former now remarked, with an apologetic sigh,

‘There is good Mrs. Thompson nodding at me so vigorously, like a Chinese mandarin, I almost fear she will do her head an injury. And Mrs. Brown-Johnson is patting the chair beside herself. Oh,

dear! If you don't much mind being left alone, my child, I must go to them a moment. I'll tear myself away very soon.'

So Hester stood alone in the crowd of girls; few of whom she knew. It was dull, and she looked with a weary, slightly disdainful gaze around.

A pair of dark eyes met her glance. For a moment, with a little thrill that was almost a visible start, Hester seemed to notice only those eyes, but to recognise, nevertheless, that the handsome face they lit was that of the stranger she had seen for a moment at Christmas vespers. Immediately afterwards he had turned away. Still Hester felt convinced that, for the second time, he had been watching her unperceived, as he imagined.

'Aunt Bessie!' she eagerly whispered, when presently that lady came back to her post. 'I have seen that handsome

man again—The one, you know, I saw just once here, at Christmas vespers, and never again! You remember . . . There! there he is to your right. Don't pretend to be looking; take care! Oh, he *has* seen you!

‘My goodness! I declare, it is Christopher Kenyon.’

With both hands eagerly ready, and beaming eyes, Mrs. Armytage seemed prepared to burst, as might a large cushion propelled from a cannon, through the crowd towards the stranger. Meanwhile, he, with as eager a gleam of friendship in his face, was dexterously and rapidly making his way towards her.

‘My dear Kit! Is it *really* yourself?’ cried Bessie Armytage, who was an Irish-woman by birth, as her question betrayed, and perhaps also the genial warmth and slightly rolling r's of her accent.

‘Really myself! There are doubtless

several other persons in the world whom I should not object to being instead: but as it is, this is I,' he slowly answered, smiling; and feeling like one who wants to enjoy a sudden unexpected pleasure, tasting its relish at some length, and not to gulp it down all in a sudden.

But that was not Mrs. Armytage's plan. She almost bewildered him with a flood of rapid questions. He had only time to insert monosyllables of 'yes' or 'no,' till, pausing for breath, she ended in a reproachful voice.

'And so, I suppose, you are spending your leave at Cleeve Court with your old uncle. How could you never let me know you were here, all this time?'

'I have only come down this very afternoon. I was merely here before for three days at Christmas,' uttered the accused, in emphatic self-exculpation. 'Spare me! If I *had* known you were here, it would

have been indeed an oasis in the desert, and I might not have been so hasty to shake off the mud of Westcliff from my boots.'

'Tut, tut; you always had a flattering tongue. Don't waste your compliments on an old woman like me. Here, let me introduce you instead to my niece. Hester, my child, this is Captain Kenyon, one of my oldest friends in India.'

'What a Methusaleh you make me out!' returned her friend, in an amused murmur.

Then, as Captain Kenyon fully recognised, looking at Hester, that *this* was the girl he had twice seen before, wondering who she might be, he took her hand. Neither could ever afterwards rightly explain to themselves how it was, but their first mutual greeting was a strange one. Hester had silently given him her hand, and—there they stood! Hand in hand, simply looking at each other, not speaking. No

doubt the situation was brief, for Mrs. Armytage's voice roused them both, and their light but sympathetic hand-clasp seemed to dissolve asunder. It certainly struck that good woman as odd, but for a mere moment: no more. Kit Kenyon had whimsical ways with women, and fancies full of gallantry about them. This was a brief homage on his part, no doubt.

But the two actors were secretly, vaguely aware they had behaved strangely, and in a manner unusual to their own ordinary selves; for—however shortly, still during an appreciable number of seconds longer than custom required—they had stood as two kindred spirits might on meeting in another world.

Kenyon thought to himself afterwards:

‘Can my mind have brooded in solitude till now in society my fancies seem to embody themselves in whomever I meet? A strange star-gazer this girl must think

me—and her eyes *were* like stars ! For the moment, it seemed to me, I had met at last that other half of oneself which old legends say was created at our own soul's birth in past eternity. The second self that our longing is always to meet and be united with at last ; man and woman, one perfect whole.'

And Hester took herself to task in the small hours of that night.

'What must he have thought of me? What possessed me? Some curious feeling came over my senses ; and, as he stood and held my hand, there *I* stood. It was well Aunt Bessie spoke, or while he pleased to stay in that position I might never have stirred.'

Kenyon roused himself, as did the girl, however. Though it was only to offer his arm to Hester, and say,

'This dance is nearly over, I fear—still, would you like to finish it with me?'

Hester did so like. The waltz was soon ended; for which reason perhaps Kenyon asked her briefly, in a very quiet voice, as if under a subduing spell, to give him the next one, and when she said 'Yes,' with a simple directness, he took her for some tea. But this did not explain why, after two more dances had passed, that the third still found them together. Hester was not certain that Colonel Kenyon had even formally asked her each time. They had not talked to each other either with any brisk mutual ball-play of questions and answers, between the pauses of the dances. And yet both had come to understand that they knew little and cared little about the people among whom they had *found each other*! That last expression, though unspoken, was felt by both. Kenyon indeed seemed never to bethink himself that Hester could wish herself with some one else.

This meant by no means a *veni, vidi, vici!* assumption on his part; he was no swaggering soldier, always believing in his own conquests. Nor was he one of those *very* quiet prigs given to metaphysical discussions with kindred souls, which is simply platonic flirtation. It may be difficult to describe his state of mental being, seeing that even to himself no clear thought illumined it now. He was simply a dreamer of dreams; a man fond during long spells of time of humorous melancholy tasted in his own company and that of favourite books (no solitude this to him). For feverish snatches of existence, certainly, he would rouse himself to do as he saw those around him doing; strive to enjoy to the very utmost their amusements, appearing more ardent, eager, and gay than any. But very often, and that soon, he would discover other people's amusements failed to amuse him,

and that because of the people, not the pastime. The *individuals* to him were everything: not their deeds, not their circumstances.

Just now he was still utterly engrossed with his own sudden pleasure in Hester's presence, and vague dream from the first moment of meeting that here was one being, at last, in almost perfect sympathy with himself—that was all. And he did not try to awaken himself.

The sight of Mrs. Armytage's face in the distance, suddenly recalled him to his usual state of mind.

'I am afraid I have been very selfish—no doubt a whole crowd of other partners are eagerly watching for you? Shall we go back? The music is beginning again,' he said, with flattering reluctance.

Hester suppressed a sigh, and consented, murmuring that she knew very little of

the male dancing element of Westcliff society.

‘May I return, then, presently, after a few dances?’ asked Kenyon, with eagerness in his eyes.

He had no thought except just to show naturally his real pleasure and wishes. But one acrid-minded spinster, who had ‘known him from a boy,’ and considered such acquaintance privileged her to publish all the faults she had ever supposed herself to discern in him, observed to two simple-minded and careful mothers,

‘Look at Christopher Kenyon! What a terrible flirt he is, when he *does* set about it. That was always his way; pretends hardly to notice any woman, though he is civil to all who come across his path. Then all of a sudden he singles one out, and never leaves her.’

Kit saw the glances levelled at him, as he stood now in a doorway, and shivered.

‘Ugh! They are holding a dissecting-room lecture, I know, and I am the corpse operated upon . . . Old acquaintances who are *not* friends are sometimes worse than enemies.’

He turned away to talk to Mrs. Armytage—and to watch Hester, stolenwise.

Kenyon had, without knowing it, made his late partner the fashion that evening. Hester had been seen, led out, distinguished by one of the ‘best’ men in the room, and was now beset by newly-sprung admirers.

‘She is charming,’ he said to Mrs. Armytage presently, as both watched this little scene.

‘She is a dear child; and I am so glad you helped to make her enjoy herself to-night; for she found most of her partners dull before,’ answered that good woman, who was really very simple, but thought

herself on some occasions quite a diplomatist.

Feeling his conscience absolved beforehand by such an implied indulgence, Kenyon once more appropriated Hester, when three dances had elapsed. For some undefined reason, perhaps to tantalise himself, he had waited, though he had noticed her looking round before, as if not altogether satisfied, he fancied, with her present society.

It was difficult not to feel slightly triumphant on seeing Hester's beautiful eyes suddenly light up as he approached, with a quick, soft gleam, that beamed upon him thereafter and did not die out. She somehow gracefully dismissed her various other would-be partners ; and they two were once more together. Kenyon danced well, but somewhat slowly ; his style being considered rather con-

ceited by many of the young Westcliffians, who loved to dash into the sharp exercise of what they called a 'rattling gallop' (or rather a race in couples), and then to breathe hard when resting, and freely use their handkerchiefs. Kenyon had found a comfortable and secluded nook after the dance, and felt that the place and hour, and their nearness on the sofa, were propitious for conversation.

'When are the fates likely to make us meet again?' he asked of Hester, with an earnest inquiry in his eyes.

It struck her he might have said, 'When shall we meet?' or else; 'Shall I see you at Mrs. Armytage's house?' His question was unconsciously characteristic.

'There is an afternoon tea at Mrs. Thompson's to-morrow,' she smiled softly back. 'I should hardly think, however, it will be a party *you* would care for.'

‘But Mrs. Armytage will be there—and you?’ he queried, affirmatively. ‘Don’t you think a place signifies little; the persons everything? I can imagine being perfectly happy in the desert with some people, and wretched in Paradise with others.’

‘Yes—I quite agree. But it will not be a desert to-morrow; on the contrary. Except, indeed, in the sense that one is never more lonely than in a crowd sometimes.’

‘You looked lonely when first I saw you this evening,’ answered Christopher, softly, with mischievous amusement. ‘How delightful it is to be met half-way in one’s meanings! Do you remember what the chief captain asked Paul?—“Canst thou speak Greek?” Half of what one says to many people is Greek to them; for one’s words seem to convey only sound, sound, sound! to their ears, without the

deeper understanding, which is everything.'

Hester looked down flattered, and played with her fan ; the inference was plain that she understood. Kenyon looked at her, a fuller sense of her beauty growing upon him.

'Is it not a little vain to—take it for granted that those who speak Greek are so much more clever than the supposed barbarians around them?' she objected, with a most winning modesty.

Kenyon glanced up quickly, and, seeing humour gleaming softly in the girl's eyes, they laughed outright together at their own supposed pretensions. A woman with humour possessed a rare charm for him.

'Far be it from me to think myself a superior being,' he hastened to apologise, with a mock sigh, beneath which was real

enough humility. 'I would merely explain with an old Frenchwoman who once said, "I don't pretend to say if I have good taste: I only know what is *my taste*."' "

When Kenyon took the girl and Mrs. Armytage to their carriage, Hester felt as if she had seldom—no, never!—been more happy with anyone than in his society that night.

'Well, and *how* did you like my old favourite, Christopher Kenyon?' asked Mrs. Armytage, in her warm, full tones, when she and her niece were alone together. She thought in her heart, 'I know the lamb does like him already; but, old witch as I am, I'll pretend not to notice anything.' Aloud, she went on: 'He used to dance well, and he was always very agreeable.'

'Yes, he is—he does,' said Hester,

dreamily. ‘But there is something more—I don’t know what it is—something in his manner: he is different from other men.’

CHAPTER III.

CHARACTER-SKETCHES.

WHEN Hester said that Christopher Kenyon was different from other men, it was not entirely a mere girl's fancy, who, having small experience, thinks each one who interests herself stands apart among his fellow-kind.

Kenyon had led a different life in his boyhood from that of most English-bred lads. His father was somewhat distinguished in diplomacy, and Kit had passed the first and most of his school-years 'abroad,' as we islanders vaguely express.

it. Though afterwards he was sent to Harrow, it was too late to undo first impressions, and make him believe England alone habitable, our ways always best. He was already a young cosmopolitan; and pleasant vacations and later leave-seasons spent as he grew older in Madrid, Paris, and gay Vienna, where the beardless boy-soldier was petted by charming women in the most exclusive circles of society, did not increase his fondness for dull country quarters whilst soldiering in England.

He had hardly ever had any opportunities to wear a pink coat and ride all day across country after a fox or hare; though he had gone on many a bear-hunt in Russia, after wolves in the Carpathians, and spent days among the Lapphunters on high Scandinavian fjelds. When visiting at manor-houses among his country uncles and cousins, he had been detected sup-

pressing one continuous yawn whenever 'grand runs' were run again, and had in malicious despair at last so shamed his relatives by joining in the pretended eagerness, and discoursing upon the 'dogs! and how each barked! of waving tails! foxes' feet!' and so forth, that out of pity for his (supposed) ignorance, and not to expose him further before stranger squires, the subject had been changed.

Worse still, the young man did not care to take a gun in his hand every morning and go out 'to kill something.' He said, he would much prefer knowing that the woods were full of proudly crowing pheasants, and that brown partridges were stealing through the stubble in shy, happy coveys, rather than the half tame creatures should be slaughtered at battues or maybe only wounded, and then, with their necks wrung, be piled in his bag, a mere mass of feathers.

On the whole, Kenyon was well enough pleased when he was ordered on foreign service. Lately he had but just returned from some years spent in India, mostly in remote stations. He had thought to like so-called solitude and the different life; but trying hot climates and lonely hill-forts satiated that ardour. Lately he had returned to England on sick-leave, and strayed down to Westcliff—because no home was left him now on earth; journey as he might from Stockholm to Constantinople to the well-remembered haunts and ways of old. His dear and near ones were all dead; the Kenyons were not a strong family. It was to him as if the beloved home-group had taken a longer voyage to a further foreign home than any before in their wandering lives, and had unkindly left no address behind for him who had always so gladly followed them hitherto, yearned to hear from them.

At Westcliff, Kit was staying with an old widower uncle whose sons, grown, busy men, cared little to visit the quiet Court ; and whose sister, also widowed but childless, lived with the old baronet, and kept the household well-regulated as to punctual roar of gong, family prayers twice a day, recurring dishes on especial weekdays, and a Sunday sweeping into a locked cupboard of all light literature, newspapers, and even other inmates' letters. It was not amusing for Kit, but it was thoroughly comfortable—and he, being often unwell still, had not much heart to roam. His old aunt was fond of him, even indulgent with all her sternness ; pretending not to smell the constant incense of tobacco from his room which she heartily disliked. His old uncle was really glad of his nephew's society ; for many years' weight had not yet crushed out the original Adam in him, and he liked to see an upright

form come through the hall and a *man's* voice answer his quavering questions. Kit cared for them both in his queerly contradictory heart ; though a dozen times a day he vowed to himself he was oppressed by the solidity that became stagnation of the slow easy life. At nights he played first draughts with the one and then chess with the other, because it amused them ; and, though terribly bored, he was gently, pitifully 'sorry for old people.'

In the daytime he generally strolled from habit into the Westcliff club. Cleeve Court lay at a little distance from the town. The Westcliff men hardly knew how to regard Kenyon. They owned he was a handsome man, and had seen a great deal of the world ; but—— Well, in spite of his agreeability occasionally when it pleased him (poor Kit fondly hoped it had pleased *them* !), yet very often their presence seemed blotted out of his consciousness, so

engrossed was he with some magazine article, or library books few else cared to look into, all apparently with titles ending in *ology* or *ism*. Besides, the fellow was half a Frenchman ; some one had discovered or heard say he spoke several languages, though, to do him justice, he was not given to 'showing off.'

'But, what you ladies all see in him, we can't tell!' was always the final verdict. Women could not tell either; but when lured out from his beloved den and smoke, from his books or club, Kenyon had undoubtedly a strong attraction for them, and success over his fellows. He was handsome—but so were others: of good family—still there are plenty as good, William the Conqueror and Burke's Landed Gentry be thanked!

'And he's not well-off, and got into bad health in India; and, though we hear he is so clever, he has never *done anything*!'

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This last objection was perfectly true. Kit Kenyon had never 'done anything' in the world's opinion.

And now as to Mrs. Armytage. She was a rather happy-go-lucky-minded Irish-woman, who, having married a civil engineer, found her lines of life laid down for her along Indian railways.

'Ah, well! and there are many *worse* places to live in than the Central Provinces,' she would say, nodding cheerfully, when acquaintances attempted to pity her. It was of no use trying to make her look on the dark side of things; indeed, it was secretly a great part of her inner religion never to let her warm trust be shaken in the belief that 'all things are ordered for the best.'

'But the separation from your large family of dear little children!' these comforters would cry.

'Yes, indeed. I may just be described

as the old woman in the shoe, who had so many she didn't know what to do. But you see it's such a good excuse to be often coming home to see my brood here. If I didn't, I declare they would all be mixed up in my mind ; adopted chicks ; ages and names !' she would laugh back. 'It gives one such an interest in coming back, though one *does* have to leave one's husband.'

The adopted ones were more Armytages, mostly sent back from India where the family formed a clan. Some had only fathers alive ; some no mothers ; some, like Hester, had neither. Aunt Bessie, when in England, gathered them all at holiday times under her wings. She had taken a house for a short time at Westcliff, the walls of which expanded elastically to hold ever more. And she also seemed to have room in her heart for any number ; and a little time somehow and plenty of warm words for each.

‘You are *always* so cheerful, dear Mrs. Armytage!’ people would say, admiringly, and yet some with a lurking self-flattery whispering that after all she could not *feel things*, i.e., troubles in life, as poignantly as their own dear selves. Poor Bessie! there were times—— But, ah, well! she did not talk about those times: would go away at such seasons to bed, pretending fatigue, and cover her head nearly over in the dark, and—come down smiling again next morning.

Hester was an orphan, as was said. She had early been sent as such home to the grandparents of all the Armytages, up in the lake country. Here she was the pet, who kept the old nest warm. They were always afraid the child would be lonely, though they did their utmost to make her happy.

Hester grew up, not disliking her solitary life among the grand everlasting hills.

and by the shining lakes, at times loving nature and seclusion passionately ; at other times longing, craving for excitement, the pleasures of the world. All girlhood, with promise in it, passes through as many phases as a silkworm or a butterfly. She poured her whole self, not so much ardently as honestly, utterly, into what were her wishes for the time. So she had twice greedily delighted in every hour of two snatches of London seasons, and then returned wishing for more of society. Yet she was ready to enjoy as intensely as ever the glories around her of mountain heights in loneliness and upper air. Here she climbed to think over her late delights, with perhaps increased pleasure in retrospection. Then the shimmering waters out on which she loved to row alone, alone ! and live in dream-castles of Spain ; and be now a great lady, bowed down to, beloved and feared ; now happy on crusts and sweet

love in a little cottage; now this—now that——

Then Aunt Bessie came back and asked her down for the little Westcliff season. Hester was with difficulty persuaded to go, though she wished it, fearing the old grandparents would be lonely. But they themselves declared together they would push her out of the nest, like a new-fledged bird that must be *made* to fly. Tut! change and pleasure were good for young creatures. Miss her!—not they; they could quite well keep each other amused. Had they not had time enough to learn how to do that all their lives nearly. Certainly, though they had married young, both were still like a pair of old love-birds; grey and feeble instead of green plumaged any longer, yet always drawing together with cosy twitterings.

CHAPTER IV.

WANDERING THE WORLD.

THE afternoon-party at Mrs. Thompson's saw Mrs. Armytage and her niece arrive almost among the first. The house was a semi-detached villa on a hill-side, with a gravel sweep in front, where few carriages came—for people were not rich in West-cliff, and said frequently, 'that they liked some exercise: a little walk was good for everybody'—and a pretty shrubbery belt of winter-green bushes, haunted by sparrows and cats. All the 'good houses' were similarly built, and stood in terraced rows on the two hill-sides of Westcliff. Down

in the hollow, between the two opposite heights, lay the town of shops and toiling folk generally; the beach, harbour, and promenade. If the houses were much alike, so were the afternoon teas.

‘Isn’t it a little early, dear?’ Aunt Bessie had doubtfully asked, on being unusually urged by her niece—as the former was aware.

‘Oh, no; I don’t think so. Our clocks are nearly all slow,’ Hester replied, trying to look wise and punctual, and to believe herself.

In consequence, they were perforce driven on and on into the furthest recesses of the Thompson drawing-room by ever arriving new groups of ladies in twos, threes, and shoals. They listened drearily to young ladies playing ‘pieces’ on the piano; and music meant at that date two or three airs learnt with difficulty, and forming the stock-in-trade of each performer. When

at last two men's coats appeared visible through the throng of ladies standing near the door—all smiling and talking fast and loud, as if to persuade each other they were highly enjoying themselves—Hester felt uneasy, and tried to see who were the owners. Only the sons of the house, who were acting as male decoys with bad enough grace, and confiding to their more familiar lady-friends how they 'disliked these sort of tea-fights.' Next, a few old Indian military men appeared, grey and precisely dressed; or stout and genially disposed, these last almost invariably reddish-haired and florid. At last another black coat appeared, and alone. Hester strained her neck round till it ached, but could only descry a scrap of arm for minutes till—— There! he had come in sight at last. Only the evangelical curate, weak, small, and hungry in appearance, but who presently startled everybody by

singing, 'If doughty deeds my lady please,' in a great hoarse bass that seemed to come from no one knew where.

Hester turned away, resolved to watch no more; self-shamed. At last she looked up unawares, and there *he* was. He already meant Captain Kenyon; alas, silly Hester! He must have been there some time, wedged fast near the door; but making himself as agreeable to all around as if he asked nothing more. But he met Hester's glance, and did decidedly begin edging towards her, when just then the music ceased. There was a movement towards tea and coffee in another room. The hostess pounced upon Kenyon, who, with his imperturbably agreeable manner, gave his arm to a most wearisome dowager of local importance. Following at a distance with a young Mr. Johnston-Brown,—who admired her, but, being raw, beardless, and too much flattered in Westcliff, Hester was

inclined to gently disregard,—she observed that Kenyon's manner to the other ladies was different from that to herself last evening. He talked fast; brilliantly at moments; but with few pauses for equal replies—no speaking silences.

Time passed. Still Christopher was in thrall as a kind of gentleman-butler, whose arm was required to escort many elderly ladies in turn a few yards to get a cup of tea. Aunt Bessie looked despairingly at Hester, with a meek, deprecating smile.

‘You want to go home. Oh, I know! it will soon be the children's tea-time,’ said Hester, heroically. ‘Yes, it's quite late—let us go. No, thank you; indeed, I don't care to stay any longer.’

‘*Please don't hurry,*’ said a low voice close by Hester's shoulder, as she was threading her way out.

She started. Kenyon's eyes met hers with a quick glance of half-apologetic en-

treaty, and he turned hastily to seek his hostess. The two ladies were hardly outside before a quick step came behind, and Kit, no longer apathetic or dreamy, joined them.

‘What a perfect evening it is!’ he said. ‘It seems a sin to waste it indoors there.’

Bessie Armytage smiled and accepted the apparent plea. They three went down the zig-zagging, hillside road, overhung with ilex and ivy trailing over terrace walls to the beach. Here another acquaintance joined them; or rather, joined Mrs. Armytage, that universal human magnet, who had so little heart to repel any, indeed, with her large and kindly tolerance, that she was often surrounded thickly by the burrs, bores, and weaklings of society while the brighter spirits whom she loved best had, perforce, to stay aloof.

There was a glorious sunset that evening. It rippled in a red, glittering path

over the waves that flashed dazzlingly on either side the gleaming track wherever the low beams caught their lightly-broken surface; elsewhere the sea spread wide, grey, and mysterious ahead.

The western sky was all a haze of glorious amber, against which every twig of the still leafless trees was distinctly outlined; and the smoke from some houses near rose up straight through the still air in reddish-brown wreaths.

‘On such an evening I am glad to be in England; to be at Westcliff; and to *be*——!’ Kenyon said, looking away at the scene with pure, almost perfect enjoyment therein. Without turning his head towards her, he moved nearer to Hester and spoke low, in a voice meant for her ear alone; as if convinced she would understand and share his sensations.

They had been talking; yet, as before, Hester could hardly have recalled what

each said. It had been not so much of things as of thoughts—and she was strongly captivated by Kenyon's voice and manner; and the vague suggestiveness of his words, rather than definitely out-spoken opinions.

Hester had already found out what she liked in this man was that he unconsciously seemed to help her to think. He never presumed to think for her. Even young Johnson-Brown would say calmly, if she advanced a liking or idea, 'Oh, no. You're wrong, I assure you:' or 'That's not it.'

This displeased our musing maiden: 'Why should a mere boy like that think he must know better than me?—It's his way of arguing, but what right has he to say I'm wrong till he has proved it! (and, even then, why *say so?*)' She was glad in her heart that Kenyon praised the beauty of the evening, as if it were a new good quality of enthusiasm in him; and that he

was not ashamed (as would young Johnson-Brown) to be thought sentimental over a sunset. And so, being pleased—out of pure contrariety, Hester proceeded to laugh at him.

‘How fickle-minded you must be, Captain Kenyon. Who was it said, only last night, that he had rambled too long through the earth, which was called very good at creation, to roll himself up tight like a hedgehog in the belief that there was no place in the world like England—and Westcliff.’

Kenyon turned now, and noted the soft brightness of the girl’s eyes, a little dimple that appeared mischievously a moment in her left cheek.

‘Out of my own mouth am I judged! and yet that is different from saying, there is no place like—home. I begin to believe that our native air and earth, akin to one’s bodily house of clay, might have some

subtle influence after all upon the free mind within. At moments like this I feel it so.'

Kit had a way of looking, sometimes, long and dreamily at those he talked with that could never distress and seldom failed to please women—(perhaps much practice had taught him to perfect the art). But Hester, even under the gentleness of his gaze, blushed slightly; the least fluctuation of blood being visible beneath her clear skin.

'Still, if you admire this scene, it is nothing to a morning on the cliffs,' she said, with slight awkwardness, to divert his gaze. 'This beach is vulgarised with those rows of wretched, saddled donkeys, and the organ-grinders, and bathing-boxes, and German bands. But what I love, is the morning view upon the hills there. It is so sunny, too, and so quiet; no one comes but ourselves. They don't half appre-

ciate the beauties of nature in Westcliff.'

'Up there!' said Kenyon, following her gaze with quiet interest. 'So you and Mrs. Armytage go there for your morning walks. 'I shall ask her if . . .'

He stopped himself. Hester, hardly perceiving it, said, lightly,

'No, Aunt Bessie is too busy; the mornings are her time of daily labour. I take two of the children, generally by turns, to exercise them.'

'What are you two discussing there?' said that good woman, coming up now.

'We were originally admiring this sunset view,' said Kenyon, who always changed his conversation a little for everyone; 'and Miss Armytage can hardly comprehend how strangers and sojourners in many lands, like you or me, feel that we had better never allow our roots to strike too deep in English soil.'

'Just so. I'm always feeling like a

tramp whom the policeman orders to move on, whenever one has settled down for a while,' responded Mrs. Armytage, with as cheerful an air as if she liked the life described.

'Yes,' murmured Kit, half to himself, though Hester's ears heard it, being watchful. 'I am always wandering the world.'

On their further homeward way, Kenyon then devoted himself to Mrs. Armytage, whom he had known in India well, and greatly liked.

'Wandering the world !' Hester mused in her own mind; the phrase repeating itself therein often. But it must be dreary, lonely for a man to feel so. She began to pity Kenyon.

CHAPTER V.

THE LADIES' BAY.

THE headland which stretched on the right side of Westcliff town sloped picturesquely to the sea; and was rough with rocks, copse-wood, and broken ground.

All the houses near this were nearly half-a-mile away, inland, where the curve of the hill sheltered them warmly in the valley.

The morning after Mrs. Thompson's party, Hester was slowly wending her way through the winding paths of the said coppice, enjoying the sweet freshness of

the sunny morning. One of the best pleasures on this earth is surely to delight oneself, thinking of nothing else, in the perfect beauty of a spring day. The very air around us seems all awakened, renovated; the wind blows softly with whispers of new life on its wings—and so the girl felt now.

She seemed bathed in high, wide air here, in tender sunlight. Her mind was free to range at will over the wide, steel-grey expanse of waters before her, voyaging far away, as it were yonder—flitting over the wave-tops and landing on the distant Welsh shores which lay low as a cloud-bank; to vaguely rove through sunny, unseen lands on and on, dreaming of adventures, meetings, strange fortunes to befall herself.

All this, and far more, Hester loved to imagine in spring-time and see such a far outlook. Then in summer it was pleasant-

est to bury oneself in the woods and spend long hours in stately pleasure-houses of which she knew the very rooms, though never seen by any but her eyes and built by no mortal hands ; with different fancies and favourite scenes of nature for autumn again and for winter. She had to pick her steps carefully along the narrow paths, which more resembled rabbit-tracks, through the growth of hollies and gorse. Hester was bent on going far down to a spot she knew of ; and there, sitting at her ease, to open the book she carried. But, ah ! the girl promised herself a half-hour first, to go in happy retrospection over all that Kenyon had said to her these two separate times they had met—she had such a treacherous memory, and there were many little things that already—— The girl quickened her steps to anticipate the solitary delicious enjoyment : crash ! some earth crumbled from the path's edge, and her

foot was only saved by some brambles from slipping downwards. Then there were glances too, to conjure up again; and a sun-bronzed face to recall. She must surely be deficient in appreciation, or in artistic powers, or 'something,' for even when she shut her eyes it was so hard to outline those features again——!

Hester almost gave a cry! For *there*, now; only a few steps away from her, as she turned a bend in the track, was the man himself, Kenyon. He was sitting perched on the topmost bar of a low stile, placed there to guard some vexatious rights of trespass; and as the girl came in full view he smiled in recognition, and lazily descended. Hester's eyes lightened (she could not help it) with gladness, but also a crimson blush swiftly throbbed up from her heart to her cheeks, as she allowed Kenyon to take her hand.

'Oh!' she said, honestly, with a little

gasp, 'I had *no idea* you ever came so far as this from the Court——'

'I do not suppose you had,' answered Kenyon, instantly divining her thought; and holding her fingers all the longer in his quiet clasp, while he looked at her fair face with very real admiration and an air of most soothingly reassuring respect. 'But it is not so far over the crest of the hills . . . once one has climbed up to them from the Cleeve valley . . . and I am fond of solitary strolls. Where is Mrs. Armytage or her children?—I thought you always brought a couple of little possible victims, to play unconscious of danger among the thorns and pitfalls of this your favourite spot.'

(He was giving Hester time to recover herself; and speaking with the long pauses which can be, in themselves, more speaking.)

'They could not come this morning.

Two or three of them have colds ; the rest are at school,' explained Hester.

She was thinking, while she spoke, how she had hesitated about coming this morning alone ; and had only decided to do so, because of the delicious opportunities of remembering—all about him who now stood before her.

'How slowly you came across the hill-side. I could just see your hat from my eyrie, and knew it was *you* ; but was doubtful about going to meet you lest I should have missed you instead in the maze these paths make,' smiled Kenyon. Then he looked full in her clear eyes.

'And now, must I go away? Or may I stay and have a delightful half-hour's converse?'

'Why not?' asked Hester, with gay frankness. At her own grand-parental nest up in the north, she seldom met strangers (no, *new friends*) in her rambles.

But, had she done so, would she not have been free to follow her own sweet will as to graciously bidding them stay or depart? She was never gainsaid; it was not supposed she could do wrong in these small matters; so, having only her own strong and clear ideas of right and wrong to hold fast, her young mind was vexed by no fears of breaking society bye-laws. 'I shall tell Aunt Bessie you met me; and were sorry not to meet her too. That is true, is it not?'

'Most true. I like her "above the lave!"' Kenyon cheerfully assented.

Yes, it was true; for Mrs. Armytage was such a dear soul he was always glad of her presence. She knew he never liked talking to two persons at once, and so had, how often! in olden days, occupied herself pleasantly lending propriety to his apparently absorbed attention to other women, who would confide all manner of things to

him from their new dresses to their sufferings under general misconceptions. Then he came in turn to her feet, and was scolded, advised, and befriended in a motherly-sisterly fashion. It would have been better—but no! she was his tried friend, and would trust him and not object.

‘Where were you bound for? Shall we both perch on this penitential stile?’ Kit asked, with a comically-rueful glance at the rocks, brushwood, and thorns around.

‘Come with me; and if you will promise to be very good you shall be shown my favourite seat,’ Hester laughed, recovering her frankness.

She led him squeezing past boulders, bending under thorns, brushing through a holly-brake to a smooth, flat slab overhanging a descent fairly precipitous to the sea below; and framed on all sides but seaward with a tangle of bushes.

Here Hester sat herself down in royal

state, and gave a slight sign to her squire to take place beside her. Kenyon demurred, looking at the rock with a whimsically-fastidious air.

‘I don’t much like this seat. Should you greatly mind changing sides with me?’

Hester did so; and only then perceived that he had made her move to where a rise of rock more comfortably supported her, if inclined to lean back.

She settled herself and thanked him with small, understanding smile, and an ‘Oh, I see!’ That pleased him; it was a bore to explain such little intentions or make phrases.

Like an adopted son of the east, Kenyon wore a thick coat with furred collar, for he generally shivered in shrewish breezes of the young year, where surprised West-cliffians only noticed the mild sun. But into Hester’s nook all the morning sun-

shine poured down, and was reflected from a cliff on one side; a serried wall of holly screened off draughts, and, looking through a frame of brown clematis trails or ivy wreaths that half smothered the thorn-bushes around, one could see the sea shining grey below and softly lapping the rocks, while a white sea-mew would waver in mid-air at times across their foreground, flying high that day.

‘This is a delightful spot. How wonderfully well you seem to know one’s likings and thoughts,’ said Kenyon, after a few moments of lazy contemplating satisfaction.

‘I am so glad you think so,’ murmured Hester, with shy gratified pleasure at his praise. ‘I think it would be so pleasant sometimes—not always, of course—if persons could know what was in each other’s minds without the need of words.’

‘Yes—it may be so with spirits,’ answered Kenyon, fixing his eyes musingly on

the play of the fair features so near him. 'Let us hope there will be no objections to full and delightful intercourse of mind among them—no weaknesses and worse evil of thoughts to hide. But, even here below, have you not felt, at times, that the *aura* invisibly surrounding some one in sympathy with yourself seemed to convey mutual thought?'

Hester had indeed felt it—of late. Even while she vaguely agreed, a wonder stole into her mind whether there were many before herself with whom he had felt thus. But she could not allow such small chilling surmises to creep now into her heart, on such a glorious morning; and with Kenyon beside her.

'It is beautiful; is it not?' burst almost unawares from her lips, while her eyes shone with such a genuine enthusiasm, as she looked around, that her companion fairly laughed.

‘You are a very child of Mother Nature! What would you do if you had to live months in an arid desert with only three or four sickly palms for vegetation? You would pine like a Northern larch-tree.’

‘No—I should only shut my eyes, I think.’

‘And dream by day. I know—that is one of my sweetest ways of beguiling tedious hours and peopling my solitudes, too. . . . What is your own home like? It must be beautiful scenery up by the lakes.’

Kit cunningly wished to lure again the soft light into Hester’s eyes he had seen there before when speaking of whatever she loved, and the bait succeeded. She began to tell him of that beautiful northern home where the great mountains lay couchant around, and through hanging woods of oak and birch the brooks leaped downwards in a babble of running water or white rush of falls—of the lakes and the

sunsets and sunrises; of the changes of storm and shine. Her own words warmed her to still more rapturous description: while Kenyon urged her on by playfully teasing doubts of the beauties of Nature she told of—till her eyes flashed laughing reproaches at him; and just the right amount of colour glowed in her cheeks; and one hidden little dimple peeped out beside her sweet mouth, which tried sensitively now to control rising laughter, now to smile away half-vexed curves.

‘A child of Nature. Yes, a child of sun and showers, of swift moods all as honestly shown in her frank face as the truth shines up from the liquid depths of her eyes!’ thought Kenyon. But it did not seem to him that there was any unusual strength of mind under that changefully delightful play of features. Rather the contrary. Those who show so easily all they feel get rid of just so much emotion, of joy or sor-

row, in the action ; so he philosophised inwardly now. A neat axiom ; but too easy of application to be the key to the curiously intricate recesses of many feminine characters.

‘ You have had a happy life, so far ! ’ broke in Kenyon, suddenly, as Hester paused with the satisfied air of having convinced an opponent in argument. ‘ Be thankful for it. I had a fairly happy youth, too, as happiness goes on our globe ; and, whatever Dante may say, I like to remember it in my darkest hours. It is always something to have had one’s day—and to look back.’

‘ But I don’t care often to look back. What I love is always to look forward, forward ! ’ the girl cried, turning to see whether the man was in earnest, and then giving a little gesture of her hand towards the ocean of air before them, above the ocean of water below, as if to signify the

mind should always be free as these elements, however the feet cleave to earth. 'I think it is so delightful to think of all the glorious possibilities before one—of all one can do with one's life.'

'*Do!* It seems to me that fortune and circumstances make of us what we are, mostly. Straws drifting down a stream, no better!' said Kenyon, with a despondent sigh which startled Hester. 'Oh, I don't say for a moment that all are equally miserable. Many straws happen to be drawn into some quiet pool and rest there happy; the others go floating helplessly along the current and may be sucked down in many a whirlpool. Time and chance happeneth to all men.'

'But still men can fight against odds, struggle bravely in the stream, carve out their future as women never can. Oh! how I have often wished for that reason to have been a man,' protested Hester,

with a sort of soft enthusiasm, envying the daring she felt was not in herself.

‘Don’t wish it. Men have their own stronger passions, as enemies within the gates, to reckon with. Women are at least happier in this—that they are not utterly selfish as we are in this world; and that most of them fully believe in another existence where they hope “somehow” the much wrong here will be righted.’

‘But do you not hope that, too; believe it?’ ejaculated Hester, with parted lips.

‘Don’t ask me what I believe—I only feel there is no rock under my feet now when plunged in mental darkness. Hope!—I should wish to do so, but the anchor drags, unfortunately, however often flung out from the ship. No, at the present moment I am hopeless; with no point in future to look forward to but only vacuum, space; and only the bitter-sweetness of the past as certainty.’

‘Oh, I am so sorry! But I call that terrible,’ murmured Hester, in dismay. In her distress for Kenyon she bent her slim figure far forward, clasping her arms round her knees while gazing out into the air before their faces, as if there was the space he looked into and found—empty! She had swayed fearlessly quite near the cliff-edge that was steep below them.

Kenyon said, in a very quiet voice,

‘Please excuse me; but is it not late, and lunch-time?—Let me help you to rise.’ He took hold of her as she turned with such a tenacious grip that Hester, who had easily and lightly recovered her feet, was astonished.

‘Forgive me! but I have not your nerve at any dangerous height,’ Kenyon apologised; and then the girl noticed his face had turned pale. ‘Another moment and I thought you would have been *over!*’

‘Oh, no,’ she said; now feeling nervous

too, 'it is all habit, or one's nature. I never thought of being giddy.'

'How deficient in the splendid animal courage many men praise I must be,' said Kit, grimly sarcastic against himself; as they turned by mute consent through the paths homeward. 'One of my favourite consolations, is the story of the general whose knees trembled so much in battle that, when some epauletted bull-dog remarked it to him, he said: "Yes—and if *you* were half as afraid as I am, you would run away."'

Hester's only reply was a mute look straight out of her speaking eyes in his, and a deprecating, small smile on her sensitive lips. Kit found the answer satisfying enough.

'What o'clock did you say it was?' she presently asked, after some yards of silence, as they passed amongst the overhanging bushes.

He started.

‘I never looked! Why, it is—how the time has flown!—nearly one o’clock. They will be sounding the big stable-bell at the Court for me soon, thinking me strayed in the woods.’

‘*That* is your shortest way back then,’ said Hester, stopping where two roads met.

Kit took her hand silently, held it longer than most people do, as if some connecting medium must pass between them.

‘I shall come and see Mrs. Armytage soon,’ he said.

CHAPTER VI.

‘MY LUVE’S LIKE A RED, RED ROSE.’

CHRISTOPHER KENYON kept his word, and came even the very next day to pay Mrs. Armytage a visit.

Bessie received him alone, with all her usual heartiness of manner, though indeed her mind was greatly pre-occupied at the moment. Three of the children were not very well ; and a stout nurse-maid, ‘one of the best wheels to my family-coach,’ as her mistress declared, had been called away to a dying father at a moment’s notice. So the coach was trying to run this day on

three wheels along household grooves made just difficult enough by a little bother about the gas ; a quarrel between two servants ; a suspicion of measles at school.

‘Well, you are welcome!’ Bessie cheerily announced, holding out both hands with that soft, comfortable clasp her friends delighted in. ‘Come and brighten me up! It will be good for a person of my present overwhelming domesticity. But I am afraid it is like asking a bottle of champagne to come and hob-nob with a bowl of porridge.’

And, laughing, she motioned Kit towards the most comfortable of the lodging-house chairs.

‘I am so sorry. You have been worried with some of the children being ill?’ said Kenyon, with the sympathy that was partly the secret of his great success in most women’s liking.

His voice was, at such times, especially

low, too, his manner quiet, so that no one else present but the one addressed was aware that his mind seemed for the moment entirely given up to thoughts of and for herself.

Mrs. Armytage looked gratefully pleased.

‘Oh, well, I try not to grumble much,’ (‘You certainly succeed,’ put in Kenyon), ‘but you are an old friend—so it relieves a small mind like mine to empty itself. As the proverb says, “It never rains but it pours:” but, after all, it is just as well, perhaps, when all one’s small cares come at once. One nail drives out another, and one hasn’t time to bother separately over each little trouble. Never mind about them! Come and tell me what you have been doing.’

‘Well . . . for one thing I met your niece, Miss Armytage, taking her morning walk yesterday, so we had a little talk together as well,’ began Kit, honestly, but in a rather subdued voice.

He was bound to Mrs. Armytage by old ties of gratitude and friendship, and, did she look vexed, would have regretted his impulse to seek the Ladies' Bay yesterday, however delightful the recollection.

'Yes, Hester told me; and I was very glad indeed that she had such a pleasant morning. I could not go out with her myself, and am sometimes afraid she has not enough amusement; but I shall trust to *you*, now, occasionally for that, I hope. She is such a dear, unselfish child—quite my right hand.'

Kenyon was delightedly astonished; but with self-flattery put down the implied permission to Bessie Armytage's refreshingly honest carelessness of some conventionalities, and thorough belief in himself. She was a gem among women; and had always comprehended and liked him.

This last was partly true. But the whole truth was that poor Bessie, being

nearly muddle-headed these two days, and feeling 'like a hunted hare !' as she cheerfully announced, had entirely forgotten that Hester was unaccompanied as usual by 'some of the many,' as the various youths and children were termed. Hence her bright look and emphasis of invitation, given in a hurry and expressing more than she meant; while in her heart she was thinking:

'There ! I forgot the mixture from the chemist for the other twins. What is my head good for but a sieve.'

And vaguely lost at times, but again appearing out of the darkness of her mind into temporary light as her thoughts flashed here and there, was a shadowy suggestion that Kit was a dear, good fellow, with all his so-called flirtations in the past, which she had never known as blameable; and if he did take a fancy to Hester—— She had to pursue present conversation

with Kenyon, however. Meanwhile, overhead sounded a trampling like mild thunder, rising at moments to distant uproar, for which she heartily apologised.

‘Don’t mind, pray ; I have often heard of the soft patter of childish feet,’ said Kenyon, with a grin.

Every now and then, the door would open softly, and a hesitating inroad of shy ‘Goths and Vandals upon civilisation,’ as Mrs. Armytage called it, occurred. Now came two small dots of girls, her own twins, about three years’ old, looking like round, white muslin pin-cushions tied up with blue ribbons. They crept in hand-in-hand and sat shyly at their mother’s feet on the same cushion, whence each by turns rolled off with rosy, undisturbed gravity, and was picked up and restored to her perch by Kit. Then two fine cubs of youths slouched in.

‘This is the man of my household,

Edward Armytage, our nephew, who is going to be a clergyman,' Mrs. Armytage announced, presenting the eldest, dark-haired youth, thin and eager-eyed; who greeted the guest very shyly, and then, unseen, pressed his aunt's hand, sitting half-hidden behind her. 'And this Bob, our own heir, who hasn't settled on being anything in particular yet—like many future great men,' went on Bessie, like a showman, designating a broad schoolboy, amusingly like herself, who grasped Kenyon's hand with impulsive powerfulness, and then bashfully dropped upon a chair and hid his face in a book.

Two small urchins in sailor-suits peeped round the door at times, with smothered explosions of delight in their daring, and then ran away till called forward by Bessie's motherly voice. These were the 'other twins,' who were neither her own nor of other Armytage kindred; but whose

mother, 'poor dear Jane Murray, you remember,' wrote from India she felt happier if Bessie herself looked after them. Kit patted their round-cropped fair heads, and held their small limp hands.

'How innocent they look, like ideal little choristers!' he said, as they gladly stole away again.

'Ah! so you would think, but they *are* such a naughty pair of little boys. I assure you, it is *very* hard work for me to keep them in order, often,' said a new voice.

Kenyon started, and saw a very stout little girl of about eleven or twelve, with a mane of thick dark hair about her shoulders, a broad, sallow-complexioned face, and round, rolling eyes. The rest 'of the many' teased her by assurances that they were sure if they might only pinch her cheeks her eyes would jump right out of her head.

‘Now, Uda, my dear! you must have patience. The boys have only a little mischief in them, and would not be worth a pin if they hadn’t. This is Gertrude, our eldest daughter,’ said Mrs. Armytage, with an air of good-humoured maternal authority.

‘I assure you, mamma, I am patient with them; I never say a single word in haste,’ answered poor Uda, solemnly making her eyes look bigger, and feeling righteously aggrieved at the reproof before a stranger.

‘I know, dear—keep on having patience, and you’ll be all right. You must be their little mother, you know. Now run away and ask Cousin Hester to come downstairs.’

Uda did not run, but still gave herself an air of great eagerness to obey her mother’s behests; combined with rapidly shaking out her long hair and stealing a

side-glance at Captain Kenyon ; then she walked off with all the dignity short skirts and a wonderfully thick waist would allow. Kit wished the little Pharisee would hurry herself. Presently, as he watched the door, she again returned, but alone.

‘If you please, mamma,’ she began, in a magisterial though lowered voice, ‘I am afraid Cousin Hester has quite spoilt baby ; for she has had her for the last hour, and though I offered to take Nona instead, so that Cousin Hester might come downstairs, Nona nearly cried, and won’t come out of her arms.’

‘Then ask Hester to bring baby down here, too. You won’t mind, Kit, will you, for once?’

Kit, as Mrs. Armytage often called him, —after she had nursed him as a mere boy through a fever years ago in India,—would not have objected to a dozen babies’ pres-

ence, if Hester came with them. Part of this feeling (which somewhat surprised himself by its strength) he expressed reassuringly to Bessie.

In a few minutes Hester appeared; tall and slim as a rush, graceful and pliant; carrying Nona, the ninth baby, aloft on her arm. Hester was dressed in a trailing dark-blue velvet that clung with added dignity and softness to the almost too slender outlines of her young figure, and wound in picturesque folds around her feet. She held up the little child on high, looking like a snowy bunch of embroidery; whose wide blue eyes stared awestruck at the stranger, and were soon shyly hidden on Hester's shoulder.

It astonished Kenyon himself, when he later turned over the scene in his own mind with self-scrutiny, what a glory she had suddenly brought into the room. How Mrs. Armytage's always pleasant mother-

liness and home-like ways were idealised to those of a lovingly blessing and blessed Alma Mater. The children became cherubic; while Hester herself, with the firelight shining on her chestnut hair, and her fair face gleaming with such exquisite young happiness from out of the twilight that duskily enwrapped her royal robes, was—was—unspeakably sweet! Her face was so loveable, so tender, so softly alluring to him that Kit never afterwards forgot how she had looked just then. He felt in peril, and, after feasting his eyes a few happy moments, began to laugh with an air of trying to tease Hester, that was real nervousness, as a safe outlet for his absurd sensations.

‘You look like a water-naiad in this beautiful trailing garment that winds away in such sinuous suggestions of a tail. An Undine who has stolen a little mortal child.’

Hester half-blushed; and raised her speaking eyes with a fleeting, smiling glance such as Kit's soul already loved, and had learnt to look and try for. She did not say anything, because—she was too confused and happy at sight of him even in those early days, to have her usual ready wit at hand! but she raised baby Nona now as if in excuse for pre-occupation.

‘Oh! Cousin Hester, Nona is pulling at the lovely Mechlin lace round your throat,’ put in Uda, warningly, adding, with an admiring yet sagacious air,

‘Mamma, do you know what Mrs. Johnson-Brown said the other day? She said Cousin Hester had very pretty dresses, but they were quite extravagantly expensive in her opinion.’

‘There, Hester! my poor eldest daughter. The Westcliff mothers do not approve of you as an example to their own

damsels, evidently,' laughed Mrs. Armytage.

'Then they most certainly ought!' exclaimed Kenyon, coming to the rescue. 'When one has been years away from civilised haunts, you can't think what a pleasure it is to one's eyes to see a well-dressed woman. (And *your* dress the other night,' he added aside, 'seemed to me a dream of delight. I mean, when one forgets the details, but only knows they were all that is bewitching round one central—and remembered—reality.')

'I am so glad you liked it,' said Hester, softly, bending down and laying her head caressingly against the baby's downy pate. 'The old grandparents spoil me dreadfully; I am almost afraid of wishing now, because with them it means having.'

Her every movement was grace itself; Kit fancied that a subtle delicate scent from her laces, from even her hair

seemed to steal towards and around him.

Even Bessie Armytage was surprised how long he stayed, and how lingeringly he took leave that evening.

CHAPTER VII.

‘A MERRY HEART GOES ALL THE DAY.’

SEVERAL mornings after that first sunny one by the Ladies' Bay, Kenyon and Hester met again. Sometimes the latter would tell Aunt Bessie of their meetings—sometimes not. Why should she tell when she knew Bessie liked him so greatly, and had praised his good qualities often of late? But then also, when Hester herself uttered only his mere name, the tell-tale blood would rush up swiftly to her cheeks, and her eyes would droop, so that even before that beloved motherly glance the girl

was shamed. It would all 'come right' soon, Hester vaguely hoped in shy, dreamy happiness to herself, and then—why, then Aunt Bessie would be *so* pleased!

Mrs. Armytage's troubles, too, had come still more thick upon her. Several of the children were taken ill with an infantile complaint, and she had to nurse them so closely she could not go out for some days herself. There were the boys for company; but, like dancing sunlight on water, Hester would smile at them if they offered to go with her those mornings, yet was elusively vanished when they sought her.

She was so happy—so utterly, so deliciously happy those days. There was a new light in her eyes, a sweeter expression on her features, a softer bloom on her cheek. 'How well you are looking!' people would exclaim to her; and the old doctor always smiled and said, 'Why, Miss Hester, nursing agrees with you!'

For Hester was truly not selfish; and spent hours after hours beside the little sick-beds, or in a stuffy school-room telling stories, giving draughts, playing every imaginable game from Noah's Ark up to Beggar-my-neighbour. It was Bessie Armytage herself who drove the bright young creature out to seek fresh air by 'main force,' she said.

Hester would hardly be persuaded (though her pulses were tingling to go at thoughts of the sea and the salt air, and of a face waiting to see the first glimpse of herself round the path's curve); yet, just because it seemed going to meet *him*, she was so shy and reluctant, yet so secretly glad, thankful to be urged! and would kiss Bessie in a rapture of gratitude of which that dear soul only felt the sympathy, so was grateful.

Then away Hester would dart with flying feet that soon slackened, slackened—

while her face began to smile covert-wise happily, but her eyes to glance anxiously around, and her heart to beat in muffled but distinct throbs. Oh, it seemed so easy to be good those days, when all the world was so kind and the very heavens smiled on her joy! How could people who loved, who lived, say that this earth was other than a blessed place? Could they not help each other in daily sorrows and troubles, and yet—as Hester now felt—be glad, glad, glad!

Once or twice Kenyon had failed the tryst, having had attacks of illness; then Hester's feet seemed like leaden weights as she dragged herself slowly round by some other road, not *their* path, to get through her appointed exercise. And that day Mrs. Armytage would be anxiously convinced that Hester was over-tired, in spite of 'the little witch's efforts to deceive her,'

she used to say. The girl lived by her emotions; was bright, or drooped; as they had power over her for the moment. But she never failed in her duties towards Bessie or the children, whatever her looks might betray—and she tried her utmost to control the latter, poor Hester, though her face was too much the clear mirror of her April mind.

Kenyon never left her long in doubt, if such mischances happened. Either a basket of flowers was sent from the Court, with a little note to Bessie, regretting he was not well enough that day to bring them himself; or else, whether ill or not, he dragged himself to Mrs. Armytage's house that evening. Then Hester would come downstairs, feeling subdued and chill at heart from unspoken fears, enter the drawing-room slowly, her footfall even softer than usual, and greet him with a

pale face and small set smile, while there were often dark circles round her lovely eyes.

But at the first syllables of Kenyon's murmured explanations, at sight of his dear face that showed to her shyly apprehensive glance at once that he was weak and feverish, Hester's eyes always flashed up with a gleam of quick pity and warmth. Her heart was sure to swell with tender feeling and a faintly pink flush would come and go with her every breath, so it seemed; as Kit watched her with a long weary gaze of one feeling tired-out, but to whom that sight was refreshment.

His illness confused his observation those days; his often too active reasoning faculties did not feel able to exert themselves. Much, perhaps most, of the shy quick changes that flitted over Hester's face and manner were lost upon him. He only felt that she was glad to see him,

to talk to him—and he was glad, too, very glad.

Mrs. Armytage might not be always able to leave the children for long ; but nevertheless Kit and Hester would sit in opposite corners of the long hard sofa, till the twilight spring evenings that still lengthened day by day grew dusk and chill outside. What they two talked of those evenings near the low fire-glow, or in the freshly sunny mornings by the sea, they would have found it hard to tell. But little of people or Westcliff gossip ; and much, very much of their own musings, their likings, their feelings, their past lives, too. They were so much in sympathy that neither seemed ever to forget what the other had once told. Kit was like many men in his profession, who seem to have entered the army by mischance, in some boyish phase of enthusiasm and immature self-understanding. His tastes seemed all

opposed to a rolling-stone life which must deny itself the gathering of so many pleasant lichens and mosses as so much baggage; only he had liked the excitement and change at times.

He was a very good artist, understood music well, with a fine classical taste; but beyond both was intensely, even passionately fond of reading. It was desultory reading too: ranging over so many fields of thought and humour from old Elizabethan dramatists, later half-forgotten humorists, to every darkly-discerned new thought or experiment in science, philosophy or religion of the day—that Hester grew bewildered listening to him. He would tell her, ‘You should read this, or that;’ and would lend her old volumes from the Court library, new pamphlets from London, over which she used to pore, drooping her pretty head with half-sighing, interested attention. Sometimes the boys would

rally her on her new ardour for heavy reading. Even Bessie smiled to herself at this devotion—for Hester's education had been most desultory indeed. Up among the lakes and hills, she had learnt little save to love Nature, and to be good and patient towards the dear old grand-parents.

Then came a week of wild weather, when the rain drove like pebble-showers against the window-panes constantly, and wild gales blew from over the Welsh hills across the broad sea-channel. Indoors, windows and doors slammed and rattled all day. Outside, it seemed as if all the young spring, with its tender vegetation of opening leaves and yet shy blossoms, must be drenched dead on the moist earth's surface.

At last came one blue day amid the showers. The winds had suddenly hushed one afternoon by magic, that very evening the clouds rolled off, the sunshine broke

out, the earth began reviving—and scents arose at once from dripping grass and bushes and from armies of crocus-goblets of purple and gold, from heavy-headed daffodils, hidden violets, and yellow-peeping primroses everywhere.

The children were all well again and clamouring to be allowed out. The two bigger boys wanted to get up a family boating-trip for the next day in honour of the spring weather and the universal convalescence, they said—to which Mrs. Armytage had consented, after being buffeted between them all with caresses as if she ‘had no more feeling than a feather-bed,’ she declared.

Christopher was with them as usual when the scheme was urged, and begged to be allowed to go too. And Hester’s eyes danced, and she stood up straight and tall tossing Nona high. She looked a young virgin of Diana’s train that day, strong

and hardy, a daughter of the woods and hills—almost too self-reliant, shyly proud with a touch of scorn of weaker humanity, to be a perfect woman yet, mused Kenyon, watching her outline and movements. She caught his gaze after a few moments, and *some-why* a rosier colour mantled in her cheek, a softer look came on her bright, expressive features, and she hushed the noisily-crowing child.

The day of the boating-party was one of those delightful ones when the sunshine seems new. The sea was hardly stirred by a ripple, and shimmered only a few shades darker than silver, while a tender haze of heat brooded over it.

The boys began pulling towards the Ladies' Bay lustily, for their plan was to row up further along the cliffs, land and make tea, gipsy-fashion. But the tide was running so strongly against them that, with all their toil and best college

skill, the same rocks they marked on the shore-cliffs still seemed grinning at them like stone masks. They would not own they were being beaten, so silently toiled on with hot faces and determined grip of the oars for half-an-hour. Meanwhile, the rest were enjoying the scene too much to note anything amiss.

Hester and Kenyon, sitting near each other, were watching another boat or two here and there in the mysteriously misty, shining water. Each boat seemed moving in air, its keel appeared not to touch the glimmering surface that showed like haze below, yet reflected the figures in the boats.

‘We seem in a new element of neither air nor water,’ said Kit.

And Hester felt that he had expressed her undefined thought.

‘You find words where I have only feelings,’ she answered low.

In her simplicity she meant to thank him; it was he who silently thanked her most by the secret, sweet gratification that stole into his heart at even such a little tribute from her young mind.

‘Words—words—words! they signify so little. Your golden silence is worth far more!’ he whispered back, partly suppressing the smile of pleased vanity her unconscious flattery often lured forth.

Mrs. Armytage was trying, with some difficulty, it must be owned—having Eve’s failings of curiosity and all a woman’s interest in a love-affair—only to have eyes and ears for ‘the small fry’ of the children meanwhile. Uda alone of the passengers did not forget the rightful object of their journey, in the momentary enjoyment of the mere sea and sky. She said nothing for a long time, much aware of her own self-control, but pitying the desperate efforts of the rowers. At last, however,

her small sensible soul thought it really absurd to allow its own superiority of perception to pass longer unnoticed—and she announced,

‘I don’t believe one of you has been watching how far we have got—but I have! and we are not half-a-mile away from home yet. Look at that organ-rock, and the old woman’s head, and——’

‘Oh, shut up!’ gruffly muttered Bob, who was as red as a lobster, from anger and exertions. But the attention of all was now aroused and the battle was plainly decided in favour of the tide.

‘It is running like a mill-race; if you fellows had not been toiling like galley-slaves, we should have drifted miles below Westcliff by now,’ put in Kit, good-naturedly.

A council was held, whether to land or not; the little crowd of lesser children being clamorous to boil the kettle.

‘We have been out nearly an hour, mamma; and you only engaged the boat for two hours,’ said Uda, with calm unimpassioned discretion.

‘I know, dear!’—and Mrs. Armytage whispered aside to Kit, ‘It is an unending wonder to me how such a harum-scarum creature as myself came to have such a wise child. Since I’ve returned from India and had her handed back to me from school, I’ve simply stared at her ever since.’

At last Mrs. Armytage decided that it was best to land at Ladies’ Bay, and have tea in the tiny cove. Would the elders please not think it ridiculous being so very near home? the little ones being quite happy, imagining themselves on some distant shore. Kit and Hester were curiously void of opinion on the matter; but did all they could be expected to do in carrying out the decisions of the rest.

The boat was beached. Some turf and sticks they had brought were lighted under the lee of a rock. The kettle was boiled, and the appetising contents of a basket spread on a cloth.

Tea over, the children began clambering up the cliff-side by different break-neck paths, shrieking with delight. After awhile Uda, who had followed to 'take care' of them, returned below to the rocks, where Kenyon was smoking a cigarette, with Hester near him in placid enjoyment, while Mrs. Armytage was busy re-packing the basket close by, and gaily refusing all offers of help.

'Mamma, the children have just found such a nice seat up there. I mean to take my German grammar to learn it there every morning, if we may come here instead of to the promenade,' she announced, in her staid little voice, pointing

up to a spot some way overhead on the cliff.

Hester, who was not addressed, bent over a rock-pool suddenly and dabbled her long white fingers therein, playing with the pink sea-weed that spread in tiny tree-shapes under water. Then as abruptly she looked up, and a quick glance of mutual understanding passed between her and Kit, whose eyes seemed waiting for hers.

‘Now, good people all; it is time to be starting!’ called Mrs. Armytage.

As they rose to obey, Kit hastily whispered, brushing Hester’s sleeve with his arm,

‘Come, not to-morrow but next day to the church hill—will you, dear?’

Hester murmured an assent, but blushed so guiltily the moment afterwards, she was fain to turn away and strive to show

only a portion of cheek and rosy neck to other curious eyes.

‘Shall I row back, boys?’ she asked, stooping to handle the oars aimlessly.

‘Row!—why, we’ll drift down all the way, my good girl. If you had offered to help us coming up now, for you *can* pull like the best of us when you please, but your thoughts were too busily engaged,’ said Bob, with sturdy sarcasm.

‘No, no; that’s not fair! We didn’t really want her,’ put in Edward, who was older, and more observant and romantic than Bob.

‘How red you are, Cousin Hester. Don’t stoop—it makes the blood go to your face,’ said Uda, with a caressing protection of air, who admired Hester much, but thought her beautiful cousin somewhat wanting in the ordinary common-sense of life.

‘Uda—I am surprised! You should not make personal remarks, especially in

public,' said Mrs. Armytage, almost severely, giving her reproof, however, in a kindly lowered voice.

Then they rowed home.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘DOWN, DOWN, THOU CLIMBING SORROW.’

‘NOT to-morrow—but next day!’ Kit had said. And he had added ‘*dear!*’ The sentence went rhyming on and on in Hester’s beating brain all that night and the day after the boating-party; then each time it came to the last word again a warm secret thrill stole through her. The first word of regard, affection—dared she think it *love*, that Kenyon had yet permitted himself to utter to her. Yes! it was love . . . that look had been a mutual revelation. She was so restless, though so

happy, she could settle to nothing all that day, and felt guilty of concealment towards Aunt Bessie, and yet she loved keeping that little word, *dear*, all in her heart to herself. Then by-and-by—when it was all made clear and told to Bessie—how pleased that kindest soul would be !

There was another ball that evening—a large one by Westcliff standard. Hester felt, while dressing, feverishly anxious.

‘How will this coil of my hair please *him*? and this dress—does it become me as well as the one he saw me in at the last ball—where we met?’

When they entered the ball-room, Kit had not arrived. They stood some little way from the door, but Hester’s eyes kept turning towards it, her breath fluttering, while with various pretexts she tried to guard herself from promising all her dances for the evening to a host of admiring young men who had somehow discovered

she was the belle of Westcliff. Amid her perplexities, Hester yet became aware of a plump little lady, a stranger to herself, who was watching her closely whilst answering some questions apparently addressed by a tall pale gentleman bending over her. She was a little woman, with pale, almost bleached, fuzzy fair hair, as if art had been asked too often to impart thereto golden gleams; a pink and white doll-face, and grey eyes with large brown spots curiously observable in them. Her waist was almost as small as that of a young girl, despite her plumpness and that she had reached woman's middle stage. She wore a very rich silk dress, slightly soiled, it is true, but that was judiciously hidden as well as might be under a mass of lace, while many bracelets gleamed on her fat short white arms.

‘Who is that, Aunt Bessie?’ asked the girl.

Mrs. Armytage looked round, and then uttered, in a constrained voice,

‘Why!—well, I am surprised!—it is Emma Watson that was. We were at school together, and she married a Frenchman afterwards. I believe Mrs. Vignolles is her name now. Perhaps she won’t remember me, however! if not, I don’t think——’

Next moment, however, the little woman in question bore down upon the speaker with an air of a small vessel under full sail, ruffling itself with as much pride and dignity as the best.

‘Eh, why—Mrs. Armytage, I think? How de do? Perhaps you’ve forgotten me, *hein?*—Emma Watson; but I was quite a little girl when we met last, and one alters so much in growing up—*hein!*’

‘Oh, I do remember you very well indeed. How are you?’ said Mrs. Armytage, meeting the effusive greeting of the

other with the weighty dignity naturally given by her own commanding, large presence and imposing air, but unbrightened by any of her usual sparkle of smiles and merry raillery.

‘And this is your niece, eh? I’ve just been inquiring who she was—a very pretty dress, my dear, *hein!*’ went on the little woman, with a smile meant to be flattering, but that Hester was almost inclined to resent as patronising.

Mrs. Vignolles spoke in short sentences, jerked out rapidly, and had a trick of interspersing these with interjections, of which ‘*hein*’ seemed her favourite. Hester, though her mind was far otherwise occupied, thought, in passing as it were, she disliked Mrs. Vignolles’ habit of speech—but what did it matter? The latter went on talking even more condescendingly—what did that matter either? Hester tried

to be civil, yet was secretly watching the door.

At last! Beyond a crowd of others, she knew at once the first mere glimpse of a dark head, hardly seen—dear head, most shapely of all others! she would surely know it among a thousand. And now Hester could just see Kenyon's bronzed face as he tried to work a slow way through the throng of people. Her heart had begun, at the first sight of him, to beat so painfully, strongly, she would have liked to press her hand on her bodice to still it.

Now Kit was here, Hester, like other girls in love, could have almost wished *he were not*; with sudden fears he might not admire her or talk to her as usual, or might not alas! have his ball-card free for those dances she had so anxiously kept for him. Oh, if he would but come *quickly*!

‘Yes, my dear, young girls love to dance everything, I know—just like teetotums! Well, may I introduce my cousin, Mr. Hungerford? He likes violent exercise still, too, ha, ha.’

Hester looked round, startled at finding she was being addressed; and saw the tall, pale man she had noticed before bowing to her, while Mrs. Vignolles was closely scrutinising her face with sharp, grey eyes.

‘Now, you two energetic creatures, go and dance like dervishes. Ah! there is dear Kit Kenyon at last. I see him looking about—so we two can sit out and enjoy ourselves quietly together this dance just as much as you furious waltzers;’ and therewith the little widow sailed down the room straight for Kenyon.

‘Are you engaged for this dance, Miss Armytage?’ asked Mr. Hungerford, stooping his head a little, tall though Hester was, to ask with eager, restless glance for

some answer from this fair girl's absent-minded face.

'This dance? I—I am not quite sure,' Hester softly murmured.

She was watching, watching—there! Mrs. Vignolles had laid her hand on Captain Kenyon's arm with quite an air of proprietorship; and—yes! he had smiled, though with rather a surprised air, but they were going away together.

'I had half meant to give this dance to some one else—so excuse my keeping you waiting, Mr. Hungerford—but, still, if you wish, you may have it,' Hester now said, turning with a gentle suddenness her face full on her new companion. He thought her eyes lovely as she thus faced him, dreamy, a little sadly tender, with a look as if her mind was far away. Not so far, Mr. Hungerford!—if you but knew where.

'I consider myself very fortunate, indeed,' Hester afterwards remembered Mr.

Hungerford saying, after he had whirled her off in a fast and fatiguingly long round of a waltz, while he looked admiring thanks.

‘I saw a crowd of young men round you when we came into the room.’

‘They are all such boys—they are not very interesting,’ said Hester, still in her veiled, soft tone, as if what he said just reached her ears, who was far away. Her voice was so low because her heart was faint within her—the man beside her thought her manner tender with soft flattery; with possible sympathy, by her own confession as yet unaroused. And he answered her back in a singularly musical voice, while his large blue eyes flashed with pleasure.

‘Take care, Miss Armytage! you will turn men’s heads if you say such delightful things. For the first time since many years, I feel glad to be an old man.’

Hester started, and, looking at him wide-awake, suddenly perceived her partner really was an elderly gentleman. He had danced so eagerly, whirled her round so breathlessly, she had vaguely supposed him much younger.

This man, Mr. Hungerford, had a somewhat strange appearance, which was apt to mislead persons at a first glance. He was tall in figure and slightly stooped, but so spare and active of body he might well pass for younger than his years. His face was perfectly smooth, and destitute by nature of either beard or whisker, which peculiarity in itself gives a man a somewhat boyish look; and his thick hair was of that pale reddish tinge which best hid the grey streaks that plentifully interspersed it. He had straight, cleanly-cut features, but then Hester only noticed absently the sweet-toned voice, and remarkably blue and keen large eyes. With-

out doubt a handsome man for his age, in a manner!—the girl had a vague remembrance also, later, as of pale features and fine small wrinkles closely crossing a parchment complexion. But they two had paused a second time, and sat down to rest near a curtained recess in which Mrs. Vignolles and he, Kenyon, were already seated.

Hester's breath came hard, she knew little more of what was said to her, of her own replies, with watching those two. Christopher had seen her, for she was aware of one or two fleeting glances in her direction that seemed to avoid meeting hers, at which the latter were as instantly shyly and proudly withdrawn. Mrs. Vignolles was rallying him gaily on some subject or other, that was evident; his replies being given with the constrained laugh and air of looking with interest at the ceiling, floor, or furniture around

often attempted by men in such circumstances. Hester wondered what the subject might be. She caught one appraising look of the sharp grey eyes opposite at herself, she fancied—but, no! the widow had only just made her acquaintance a moment. It could not be——

If Hester could but have heard it, however, this was a fragment of the conversation in the recess opposite.

‘But I assure you, I’m not joking—*hein!* Quite the talk of Westcliff. Why! I’ve only been here two days, and yet I heard it.’

‘Heard what? What is the talk of Westcliff?’ retorted Kenyon, thinking it time to abandon the manner of careless laziness he had assumed, which suited his dark, almost Eastern handsome face. He now tried the effect of suddenly turning sharp round upon the attacking enemy with a good-humoured air but glowing

look in his questioning eyes. He was secretly goaded, absurdly so by such a common thing as one woman teasing him about another, but he must not show it.

Mrs. Vignolles did not flinch.

‘Why, they say that you are engaged to marry this girl, there! Fancy you a Benedick—my poor friend, you sitting down to cold mutton for lunch, you with a housefull of babies, ha, ha! But, perhaps—the young lady may have a fortune. I hope so for your sake, I’m sure——’

‘What nonsense! The idea of my being engaged to any girl!—a poor soldier in these days, with little or nothing beyond his pay,’ retorted Kenyon, playing with Mrs. Vignolles’ fan in a dangerously nervous way. He had to avoid her gimlet glances evasively now, and was furious with himself and her. Had he not had long enough practice under such feminine inquisition, and prided himself that he

could pass smiling through the ordeal and reveal as little of his real mind as any man? But now he felt as shy as a school-boy quizzed about a calf-love, and horribly afraid of betraying himself.

‘What a sad flirt you are—you always were, Captain Kenyon,’ the little woman went on, with a mock sigh, but a tenderly meaning glance, lost for once upon Kit.

‘A flirt. I do hate being called that,’ he said, moodily. ‘I never mean to flirt—never. Certainly I like making friends with agreeable people—it is one of the few real pleasures in this dull enough world. Then, wiseacres call out “beware—a flirtation,” and good-bye all pleasant converse! It is always women, too, who raise this cry. Now, will you—as a woman—tell me, why should I *not* like pretty women?’ And, with the second nature of habit, Kenyon turned a flatteringly appealing glance upon his fair companion. She was conciliated;

but not, as he fondly hoped, to leave poor Hester's name in peace. She tapped him confidentially on the shoulder with her (wisely) recovered fan.

'My poor friend, *I* quite believe you. Ah, I know what it is to need sympathy—to seek some congenial spirit. But still—ahem!—if you will take some advice, be careful! You may be caught before you know where you are.'

'Caught!—what an expression, Mrs. Vignolles! Why, she is the most high-spirited, delicately-minded girl—Let us go—?'

'Eh, eh; no, don't get up. What a rage you are in. I didn't mean that. No, sit still, *do*; and don't be angry with a very old friend as I am, after all, and a foolish little woman, too—eh, Kit—only anxious for your welfare. She is charming, I'm sure—all you say. But then, you know, there is her aunt.'

‘Another of my oldest friends—and one, I believe equally interested in my real welfare,’ returned Kit, grimly.

‘Well, well—you should know your own affairs best. And perhaps she *has* money, eh? Her dresses must cost a pretty little fortune, if they are all like that, you know.’

‘I never heard, and certainly never asked, if she had a penny. Would you like to go into the other room, now, Mrs. Vignolles?’

His poor Hester! It *was* a shame to stay coolly there, criticising her, who sat so gently unconscious just opposite; and how dreamily still, and how lovely, how loveable she looked.

‘We need not go just yet, need we? Well, if she hasn’t money, she ought certainly not to marry a poor man, for he will never be able to dress her like that. How extravagant some girls are!—a white

muslin and a real rose were always thought enough for a young thing like me before I was married. There is Mark Hungerford, my cousin—quite smitten, too, and rich enough; my goodness, yes!—she ought to take him, ha, ha!’

Kenyon rose and offered his arm.

‘If you don’t mind, Mrs. Vignolles, there are some other partners in the next room from whom I should like to secure a few dances before it is too late.’

He was secretly at white heat, but outwardly had recovered self-control now; though he brushed close by Hester without trusting himself to look at her. He never guessed that went like a stab to her heart. They had gone a few steps in silence, when Mrs. Vignolles’ plump, white arm pressed his own tightly, and, as he looked down surprised, she whispered, with a sob in her voice,

‘You are *angry* with me—oh, yes, you

are! This is twice you have called me Mrs. Vignolles, and—and—it used to be something very different. Ah, I have no other friends here to-night; and I had been quite looking forward—— But I am so foolish; no wiser than when you used to call me your silly little Pussy.’

‘I used to call you Emma,’ said Kit, who, to do him justice, had never heard of her as Pussy; and who, though aware of humbug, yet could seldom resist a softening feeling when it was practised upon himself by a woman. ‘We called each other by our Christian names, but that was long ago at Dresden, when you were a little girl in short frocks’ (he forbore to add when he had been in round jackets), ‘but now that you carry dignity——’

‘Well, well! all the more reason, you see, as we *are* such old friends!’ the little widow interrupted. ‘And you will forgive

me, Kit, if I made you angry, eh? oh, do—say you do; *hein!* You will be just as nice still to me to-night; a poor little stranger in Westcliff?’

Pathos went oddly with such jerky sentences, and Emma Vignolles was an experienced citizen of the world as Kit well knew, feeling humorously tickled. But of course he reassured her as to his forgiveness not being needed, and their old friendship’s endurance; and even somehow found himself lured into promising to take her to supper, and, later, to see her to her carriage.

‘Dear me! quite nice to have a quarrel and make it up, isn’t it?’ she remarked, so sprightly at her successful manœuvres her feet quite danced, and she leant closely on Kit’s arm, looking up in his face as a little woman can. ‘And we’ll talk no more about such nonsense as love, eh? “What is friendship but pining?”—how does it

go on?—"but civilised man cannot do without dining"?'

Kit laughed, as he left her on a seat; if not clever she was sharp, which often passes well enough for wit in the hurry of society, when people have little time to examine such small coin.

And Hester?——she saw it all, entering the room, languid and gracefully quiet, behind them; saw the little widow's stolen pressure of Kit's arm, her looks so shamelessly close, cast up into his very eyes—but, hearing nothing, the girl drew her own conclusions.

She felt a strange, sick feeling creep over her, there was a dull, sore pain about her heart, and her breath came heavily. Then *he*, or Captain Kenyon as she again now stiffly called him in thought, approached her with a newly grave, deferential bow, as if he had not seen her as yet that evening, and asked for a dance.

Very stilly Hester named one—one of several she had secretly so cherished for him. Kenyon thanked her, hesitated.

‘You are so run after to-night, that I ought not perhaps—still, will you not give me one more?’ he asked, slowly, heavily. (One—one more!) Oh, yes! as calmly, feeling coldly, Hester gave that also.

She seemed dancing in a dream till Kenyon came to claim her. And yet, somehow, she had seen him talking to other women, eagerly even excitedly with a frequent almost nervous laugh and glitter in his eyes very different from his quiet times spent lately with herself. Why,—yesterday now seemed long ago! He came to her slowly at last, and at once his face changed, his manner became very quiet, almost dull. *Did he not want to come, then?* Still she would be patient and see; so they danced together.

‘You look a little pale to-night; are you

perhaps already tired?' Kenyon asked, as they paused; and though he said it more reservedly than usual, yet the tone of interest brought a faint warmth again reviving in the recesses of Hester's heart. Then, as she murmured she was very well, he went on,

'You seem so calm, so unusually still; why is it? You are like the queen of night in this lovely dress. Come—there, look and see and appreciate yourself to-night as you ought. I do not believe you have an idea of how you look.'

He drew her near a long mirror, and paused as if by accident. Hester saw herself—and his dark eyes behind, admiringly watching hers. She was more glad, a little more glad, truly; and yet she knew not why, but felt that between them seemed a gulf to-night.

Hester did indeed look especially lovely just then. Tall and slim beyond the rest,

her exquisite white shoulders rose out of a dark blue dress falling in fairy clouds of gauze powdered with glistening dew-drops. The mutinous waves of her golden-brown hair were closely banded to her small head; her dark delicate eyebrows drooped with a slight sadness that was a piquant contrast to the exquisite youthful clearness and brightness of her complexion. She looked, indeed, a queen among her kind—a nymph of sweet twilight.

Kenyon did not seek now to lead her apart, but kept her always with a crowd, chatting of nothings, sometimes interchanging gay remarks with others. So their first dance was spent.

It seemed to Hester as if the time would *never* pass till their second, and last, dance together arrived. Meanwhile she had marked Kit going from one to another of his lady-friends, always gay, agreeable, always eagerly welcomed with smiles; and

often, very often thus turning to, thus welcomed by, Mrs. Vignolles. The girl had never known before what torturing strength of jealousy lay in her nature, and was half-frightened at this pain of it she felt.

She had no smiles for him, in her honesty—oh, she knew her wrongly-minded bitterness!—when he came at last. She *could not* raise them at will; and he! he had none for her. His face had grown set and almost stern on nearing her.

Again they silently started to dance together; the minutes were passing so that Hester could almost have counted the moments aloud in her consciousness of each—but still she felt too humiliated, too proud to speak. Kenyon did so, at last, the first.

‘My gracious Silence, hail!’ he said, smilingly; then, as she opened her soft eyes inquiringly, ‘You do not know where

that comes from ; Coriolanus so addresses a silent lady.'

'What lady—?' murmured Hester, so foolishly distraught she could say nothing better.

'His—he says it to Virgilia.'

(Why did Kenyon not say, *his wife*?)

'Why do you accuse me? you were as silent yourself. And yet I—I saw you saying a great deal just now to—to Mrs. Vignolles.'

'Oh, she—she is an old friend,' returned Christopher, carelessly, yet annoyed.

He knew Hester was vexed, by her voice ; and yet he was vexed she should be so, since from *her* he expected only peace and sweetness. All womenkind seemed leagued to vex him this night.

'Do you like her very much, then?' asked Hester, her syllables falling like small ice-drops on her own ears ; sounding with what he called gentle bitterness to Kenyon.

‘I like Mrs. Vignolles—she amuses me,’ he answered, with unconscious emphasis.

It was simply the truth, and—well, he was sorry for Hester, and more sorry for himself, for what could this young, happy creature know of his older feelings and cares? Then, too, Emma Vignolles had already worried him; and, though he could not have spoken to Hester even abruptly as to the other, yet he was more worried than either knew, even sick in soul therewith, and this pale, sweet face was a mute reproach.

‘What a lovely dress you are wearing to-night—it must have cost a great deal,’ he suddenly said.

Hester just raised her shoulders carelessly.

‘Yes,’ she assented, ‘I believe it did.’

It had been a birthday present from her dotingly-fond grandfather.

In almost silence the moments slipped

away, were well-nigh gone. Hester's next partner was approaching. Kenyon suddenly turned and whispered in her ear,

‘To-morrow, then—you will come out to-morrow?’

‘I do not know. I am not quite sure.’

Her fine, upper lip slightly quivered; she would have trembled but for a strong effort.

‘Forgive me,’ he urged, beseechingly, in a hasty whisper; ‘if you are not pleased with me for any cause, forgive me. I have told you I am only a mere feather, blown about by winds of chance. *I cannot help myself!* but, try to forgive me.’

They were standing close side by side. His passionate, pleading eyes met Hester's in an imploring glance; his arm pressed hers very gently but nearer; a thrill passed through Hester's whole frame in answering vibration at the touch, although he had almost instantly looked away, fearful of

observation. She bowed her head, not trusting herself to speak ; and so they parted.

‘Take care, Master Kit ; Westcliff people will talk more than ever,’ said Mrs. Vignolles, archly, a few minutes later, coming up as he stood apart, alone ; and she looked significantly at a dark-blue dress.

‘I hate Westcliff and its gossip. I shall go away,’ he said, angrily.

‘Eh ? Oh, don’t, Kit ! I mean to stay here.’

For a moment Kit hated this gadfly, too, with her reiterated ‘Kit.’

Mrs. Armytage was especially tender to Hester that night as they went home ; but singularly silent.

‘How do you like your old school-friend, Aunt Bessie ?’ said the girl, with forced lightness by way of easing her sore heart.

‘Little wretch, I can’t endure her—she

was always a minx,' burst out Bessie, with astonishing vindictiveness. 'And she was *ever* so much older than me at school, whatever she may pretend now. How she runs after different men, too!—and I am certain they don't like her in their hearts one bit the better for it.'

Hester, poor child, was not quite so convinced; but was grateful for the warm, unspoken alliance, and the motherly kiss that accompanied it.

And yet the night she passed was dreadful to her; restless, troubled, oh! so weary. A sleep that seemed relief came at last, but was a cruel mockery. Only a succession of dreams in which Christopher Kenyon always turned from her—and little Mrs. Vignolles looked up fondly in his eyes.

Then poor Hester started again, wide-awake, and tossed and tossed, and would have gladly sobbed aloud, but feared to

wake dear Aunt Bessie in the next room,—
the door between them being left slightly
open at nights. So her pillow was wet that
night with secret silent tears.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LITTLE GREY CHURCH.

NEXT day, though the sun shone out fitfully at times, towards noon again a wild shower was driving over Westcliff town and the cliffs and downs around.

Upon a high grassy hill on the far side of the town, Hester was nevertheless standing, with nervously clasped hands and irresolute troubled features. The wind blew her dress tight about her figure, as she stood on the cliff-edge; the wet drops drove in her face mingled with salt spray. The turfy hill rounded over and

then sloped sheer to the sea, that tossed all grey and broken below, and grey and cold the wind and rain came driving over it straight on Hester's pale pretty face. She pinched her poor fingers in pain of mind and shame, she could have cried out to the sea-birds that wheeled before the gale and dipped their wings as they circled above the turbid sea. *She had come to the tryst—and her lover was not there!*

Oh! that she had followed her own proud first thoughts that morning; that Aunt Bessie had not, pitying her heavy looks, kindly forced her outside; that, softened by that tender woman's embrace, Hester had not weakly allowed secret love to plead, urge, drive her hither, whispering she should in fairness hear what he, Kit, had to say in his own excuse. There were no veiling self-deceptions left in Hester's mind now, no maiden illusions of friendship, soul-attraction. She knew she

loved Christopher Kenyon, and every hair upon his dear head ; loved the very ground he walked on, because his feet had passed thereby ; loved for his sake the very air that blew about him.

Hester loved utterly, entirely, with all the depth and force of a most loving nature. And, yet she was so proud, she felt an intensity of anguish in humiliation and womanly shame at being here to meet him—and he so careless, perhaps even utterly forgetful he had urged her to come ! As she dwelt on the thought, Hester's feet, that had seemed magnetised to the cliff-edge, suddenly darted away with her over the hill-top, down the rough grassy slope, all wet, on the other side. She never once looked around ; never heard aught of call or cry from any other human being on the lonely hill, though her flying form, with only sky for its background, was plainly visible to anyone up yonder.

She passed through a lych-gate set in a low wall, entered a churchyard, where the dead folk's beds were pleasantly turfed in billows like to the sea beyond there, and set about with living flowers and bushes : both grave-grass and rosemary and brown wall-flowers dripping wet and wildly blown upon by the spring rain and sea-blast, yet green, wholesome, and sweet-scented.

Up a pebbled path Hester ran on and into the old church porch, where she at last halted, and sank slowly down on a worn stone bench. It was an old Norman church, built out there on the windy cape as a landmark to passing vessels. The low entrance was set round with toothed stone-work, and there, over Hester's head, was a dusty niche where an image had stood, while the broken holy-water stoup was by her side. Hester noticed nothing of these lingering signs of her own religious faith once regnant here. Five minutes

had passed—then more ! and still the girl never stirred from the forlorn attitude she had unconsciously dropped into, but sat staring upwards at the rain-swept sky, while large bright tears dropped slowly from her softly brimming eyes.

She did not hear a footstep on the path, did not know for a second or two that some one was looking round the edge of the porch, transfixed at sight of the fair image of woe she presented. Then she half rose with a low cry—as Kenyon stood beside her. He looked into her face quietly but regretfully, his heart sorrowful within him.

‘My poor child !—Hester, tell me what is the matter.’

In the self-same breath Hester’s startled lips had parted to gasp,

‘Oh, are you here?—I thought you were not coming.’

Then, understanding what she had re-

vealed, the red blood rushed in a wave up to her cheeks, dyeing even the nape of her soft white neck red to the very roots of her hair. Sinking down again upon the bench, she covered her face with her hands, vainly trying to stop thick-dropping tears. Kenyon could not bear the sight. His heart seemed to go out from him to her in yearning, his soul melted. And yet he tried, tried hard to steel himself, to look away out at the rain too, to remind himself he could not, ought not to do more.

A stifled sob Hester could not quite repress was too much for his strength. He turned and saw by her clenched slender fingers how anguished was the struggle for self-mastery. Then Hester felt his arm pass slowly round her. Kit had sat down on the bench, and was drawing her weeping head to rest on his shoulder.

‘Poor darling, don’t—dear Hester, don’t

cry any more, for my sake. I cannot bear it.'

Hester gave one hasty swimming glance up in Kenyon's face at that, and saw his nether lip quivering under his drooping moustache, while his features were pale and very troubled in expression. With a little murmuring cry of love, she whispered,

'Oh, I thought you did not care—I thought last night you were so changed. Are you sure, quite sure, you do care?'

The tears were still swimming like liquid light in Hester's wistful eyes, a very rain of love, through which love's self sparkled with reviving fire, ready to break out at her lover's word into glorious shining. Her face was irresistible. Kenyon could read her whole soul there, gazing into her true eyes, at the sweet quivering mouth which tried to smile. He knew now Hester loved him; he knew too well that he

loved her. He bent his head, and his lips softly met hers. After that kiss they still remained closely side by side, but mute, and there was long silence in that wind-swept, grey church-porch.

A short while had elapsed; like eternity in that neither knew if the moments were few or many, so overpowered both felt by the tide of new thoughts and emotion that had rushed upon them. Christopher at last broke the silence with a low sigh, and murmured,

‘Forgive me, Hester—I ought not to have done it, I know, but I am so fond of you. Forgive me.’

‘But do you not really care for me?’

Hester half raised her head, and her eyes, like those of a startled fawn, sought his in innocent enquiry. Kenyon sighed again and looked away; he loosened his gentle hold of her. It cost him much to slacken his grasp of her warm small hand,

which nestled in his own so confidently, but he slowly did it.

‘You do not know how poor a man I am, dear child. You are so young, so lovely!—life is just opening before you, and all the world’s prizes would certainly be laid at your feet if—— I ought never to have let you know my feelings . . . your aunt will blame me for this, most justly, but not one half so deeply as I shall blame myself.’

‘For what? because you are poor? What do I care for that?’ exclaimed Hester, with quick, generous fire in her eyes and voice. ‘Look at me in the eyes!—Please’ (pleadingly), ‘if I ask it, you *must* look at me and see how little I heed all that—so long as you do really . . . like . . . me.’

Kit looked her in the face, but trusted himself only a moment, his own face all the more troubled.

‘You do not know the world yet, or what it is to struggle on in existence, not *live*! It is not alone that I am nearly penniless, but worse! . . . debts . . . ill health . . .’ his voice died away so that Hester could just catch the words, and he almost groaned. Then, with a nervous laugh, ‘Poor, dear child!—I do not believe you *would* care; nor more, that you would ever even reproach me in your own heart for being a pauper. The self-sacrifice, the nobleness that women are capable of puts men to shame. And we are so utterly selfish by comparison!—Oh! Hester, I feel myself worse than the worst, for having been so thoughtless towards you.’

Poor Hester! she had slowly paled. In how few moments after tasting extreme happiness, gall may mingle in the cup; human joy is so short-lived. But then with a new determination underlying her gentle manner and soft voice, which Kenyon

noticed with surprise even in his pre-occupation, she demanded,

‘Tell me only one thing. Let us put your poverty and everything else out of the question. There is only this I ask and have a right to ask. Is it *true* that you care for me as you say?’ her eyes flashed proudly with blue light. ‘You sought out my society, you seemed to like me! Were you only laughing at me in your heart; or on your honour as a gentleman did you care, however little, for me?’

It was a cry from a true woman’s heart. Soul appealed to soul, so Kit felt and answered. His dark eyes glowed in quick response, his features quivered, the mask of control thrust aside; but he looked up at the grey heavens above.

‘On my honour as a man!—it is true not only that I did, but that I do *love you*! . . . Oh! Hester—well, well, poor child, I

ought never to have said so, but it will give you less pain to know it now than to believe it could be otherwise . . . You are so young and happy you will forget all this and me soon enough, or only laugh at it; but me most miserable! I shall remember always.'

His voice dropped as he felt Hester softly drawing near to his side. She stole her hand again into his; she herself almost, if not quite, drooped the dear little head he loved so well on his shoulder.

'Listen,' she whispered, half-shamed, in a broken voice, but bravely, 'you are grieved about this only because you are so poor, is not that it?'

'It is,' came from Kit's lips, with effort.

'Will you quite believe me, if I tell you most truly that I forgive you—that never even in thought will I reproach you?'

'Yes——'

Kenyon could utter no more. Each one

of Hester's tender words fell like fire upon his poor heart, tortured with cares, doubts, irresolution. But she went on, with soft decision,

‘Then, to please me in return, you must promise not to reproach yourself either; never, never to accuse yourself any more, for *I cannot bear that* in turn. It was fate—as you are always saying—do not blame your dear self.’

‘But, Hester, how can I help it? I am and have been such a miserable, vacillating creature; and if I have given you a moment's pain——’

‘Hush, hush; say no more. Only let us be happy now together, as you love me and I you;’ (her voice grew so low it was almost inaudible but to his sorrowfully-gladdened ears). ‘Just this little while; no matter whatever hereafter happens to us both!’

Kenyon turned his head a moment aside;

was there a suspicion of tears in his eyes? Hester was not sure, as for all answer he drew down her head to its former resting-place.

Then there was silence again for a time in the old grey porch. After that came more sweetly-murmured confidences ; fresh broken accents of self-upbraidings, interrupted by gentle consolation ; loving regrets, as loving re-assurances.

Kit bitterly accused himself in heart for having once more done wrong, allowed himself to drift again on the tide of his feelings. He had brought pain, he knew, to this young, dear soul—for himself it did not much matter, he seemed used to ill-luck and sorrow—but for her he was sorry, so sorry !

But, even while he sighed, Hester, as if gifted with divining power, would soothe him by a mere word ; comfort, cheer him with hardly more than a least pressure of

her hand, the felt presence, like an atmosphere, of her love. Then again there was happiness for a time (ay ! as both felt, if only for those brief, sweet moments) in the weather-beaten tower of the little church.

At last Hester felt Kit shiver slightly, and looking up, startled, saw he was very white.

‘Oh, you are ill again ; that dreadful fever and ague !’ she exclaimed. ‘How could I not have seen it before. Why—oh, why did you come out to-day?’

Kenyon tried to laugh at her, though he did feel very weak and unwell.

‘Would you have had me stay away after asking *you* to come. It kept me late, though ; and so it seemed tantalising to see you flying from me over the hill while I was creeping after you like a poor worm.’

The rain was past now. The strong wind had swept a portion of blue sky free of clouds, and the sun smiled out once

more. These two stood up together in the church-porch hand-in-hand.

‘We might have gone inside the church for better shelter—but no, the door is locked. Strange we should have met *here*,’ remarked Kenyon, in his apparently inconsequent way ; but Hester followed out his broken thoughts nearly always. It seemed an omen ; would it be for good or ill in future ?

Then, still closely side by side, they went down the pebbled path together, looking often in each other’s eyes—the knowledge of their mutual love so sweet and new, however troubling, they could not withdraw their meeting glances long from such present, glad assurance, cost the future what it might !

And the brown wall-flowers sent up sweet odours from their heavy, rain-wet heads, while Hester stopped and pulled a little sprig of rosemary, she knew not why,

from a bush near a heavy, flat-roofed family tomb.

‘Do you know who lie under there?—all my kindred of Kenyons for many generations,’ said Kit, smiling at her a little sadly. ‘It is our family vault. I love this dear old church, and would like the thought that what mortal part of me remains might moulder into this pleasant hill beside their bones. The future heads of the family are not likely so to honour such a far-away cousin and ne’er-do-well, however; room is growing scarce. My old uncle is fond of me—he would not object to my poor presence, but his sons would hardly let me in there.’

‘Ah, no matter; I should prefer to lie under the green grass and feel, as it were, the sea and sky near me,’ cried Hester, quickly, with pitying sympathy. ‘You would at least be near your own people too.’

Christopher thought it more likely his paste of flesh and bones would be inexpensively put under whatever alien soil he might last draw his wandering breath on ; but only answered with the low laugh Hester now knew was forced, though she had at first, like many people, thought it merely carelessly agreeable.

‘This is too gruesome talk. Let us go, just for a little at least, and see the sea together from our appointed meeting-place.’

So they left the little green-waved churchyard, lying lonely up there on the hill-top, with its sleeping congregation around. Newer churches, large and well-filled, had sprung up down in the valley and the town ; which last was new, being Georgian, compared to this small house of prayer that had looked out over sea and land since the days when Norman builders raised it in durable stone. Only the fisher-

folk from the old port, and the country gentry around came here to worship now ; such as the Kenyons, whose head of the family was lord of the manor of Westcliff. But these loved well their old church on its windy cape by the 'broad water of the west.'

They all yearned to be laid like their forefathers up here in solemn solitude, where from the hill-top was a wide outlook over the rich inland valley and its smaller wooded coombes, while under the hill the sea kept softly thundering in a grand, continual dirge. Few feet of passers-by climbed up here, those that came being mostly led by love or reverence ; but the sea-birds flew overhead, and the conies played on the downs, and lesser creatures came of kindly kind.

'At noon the wild bee hummeth
About the moss'd headstone.'

Out through the lych-gate in the loose-

built wall of piled stones, Kenyon and Hester passed over the wet but short-turfed rolling down. Their steps crushed the wild thyme underfoot as they went up almost silently to the cliff-top. They looked out together on the gleaming grey waters tossing broken below (seldom blue, but with a sober beauty of their own), gazing down towards where Lundy lies and across to the dimly descried Welsh hills, and they felt the large air surround them with a silent consolation. Up from the wet grass sprang a lark, and, soaring up in the gleam of returning sunshine, battled its little wings against the fresh gale, and sang of happiness in ever higher trills. Was it an omen too? They looked at the same moment, moved by the same thought, mutely in each other's eyes.

‘What is it, Hester dear,’ said Mrs. Armytage, anxiously, when a while later

the girl returned, and, coming up to her aunt strangely, looked her in the face, then slowly pulled off her hat and flung it aside.

‘I have been up to the old church, Aunt Bessie. I went there to meet—Christopher Kenyon. He asked me to do so, and I went.’

‘But—but . . . and what did he say to you, my child? Surely——’

‘I don’t know what I have to tell you. Oh! Aunt Bessie, I don’t know whether I am very happy or most miserable.’

Then Bessie Armytage, troubled much in her own mind, but deeply sympathetic and pitiful, listened to broken explanations till little by little she understood poor Hester’s simple tale. And silently she blamed—herself. Why could she not have foreseen all this? She, at her age, ought to have been more wisely worldly, if not worldly wise, for this girl she loved,

and for the man who was her friend. But for these two she had only words of affection, of regret.

CHAPTER X.

A FINE OLD HOME.

THE day but one after Kit and Hester met on the old church hill there was to be a garden-party at the Court ; a solemn spring party, to which all Westcliff living on the fashionable terraces was invited. The Court gave three such state parties in the year.

‘Don’t you think we had better go, Hester? People might think it odd otherwise, dear ; and old Sir Christopher and his sister have been so kind to me always. But still, I’ll just do as you wish,

my child—exactly. It is easy enough to have a headache at the last moment.'

'No, no; Aunt Bessie, pray don't. We ought to go, so we will go,' said Hester, bravely, though her eyes had dark rings round them. 'Besides,' in a lower voice, '*he* might think we were hurt or unkind, and I could not bear that he should think us less his friends.'

Bessie silently looked at her niece, seeing by the rising light in the girl's eye and awakening expression she would champion Kit's cause without flinching, even against her own heart and all the world.

'Very well; only take care. Oh! my dearest, don't try to catch a sunbeam!—And when men are moths, coming back to a candle flame, they may hurt themselves but don't die of it. They can grow fresh wings after a while—women don't, always. So be careful.'

Hester made a little acquiescing gesture

of her head, and gently left the room.

What a delicious spring afternoon it was ! The air seemed to *smell* of heat as well as fragrance, all the year's new scents pent in by the late cold and rain burst out at once together. Earth's deep heart was verily wide opened that day to bless her children. The old Court lay deep in a coombe behind Westcliff between two hills. A little village, perhaps as old as the great house itself, in site at least,—for the Kenyon retainers had most likely housed there since Tudor days,—nestled in the cleft close by the entrance gates of the old manor-house.

It was a small, old-fashioned cluster of cottages, all red-tiled and flowery, 'confused with smell of orchards.' Apple and pear-trees bore clouds of white rosy blossom. Neighbours' tiny plots seemed over-running each other's domain with trespassing branches of lilac and laburnum,

and intrusive lesser flowers, which poked lovingly through the crazy wooden fences that should have parted them.

As the Armytage party, consisting of Bessie, Hester, and the elder boys, entered the gates, they found their old hosts, Christopher himself, and most of the guests assembled on the close-shaven lawn near some magnificent cedars, the pride of the country round, for generations past. Old Sir Christopher Kenyon came up halting on his gouty foot to greet them. He was a snowy-haired octogenarian, stout of body but feeble of strength; yet Hester could see traces of former good looks in his features that warmed her heart, because resembling, however blurred by time, those of his nephew.

‘Where is Kit?’ said the old man, after a few minutes’ conversation. ‘Why, he ought to be entertaining such a charming young lady instead of a lame old fellow

like me' (this gallantly to Hester). 'But no doubt he is very busy saying something pleasant to his old friends—my sister and I look to him to do that for us, Mrs. Armytage, as well as to brighten up our dull lives when we are alone. He is a good boy to us . . . a good boy.'

(It seemed strange to Hester to hear the man she looked up to in girlish worship, considered still as a boy by these old people.)

Yes, Kit was making himself agreeable to a crowd of ladies who, all admiring his handsome face, or liking him from his boyhood, were using their best endeavours to each attract a special share of his general attentions. There was Mrs. Vignolles, too—Hester was glad to see he did not stay any longer with her than others. She hid herself among a group of the dullest people she knew; for, in spite of her staunch determination 'to be as good friends as ever'

with Kit, the fear that he might be—the knowledge he must be—different in his manner from former days, and yesterday chief of all, chilled her faint heart. She could see him (Christopher) going about rapidly from cluster to cluster of people, always with a gay laugh so exactly the same that Hester knew, with the fair right-judging half of her mind, it was forced, if not purely nervous. Then the other half of herself, the femininely-foolish, jealous portion, sighed against him for being so mirthful and light-hearted, and she so sorrowful. He looked round constantly with hasty searching glances, all the while he was exerting himself to escort some ladies to tea in the dining-room of which the glass garden-door stood wide open, to find seats for others, to be the willing squire of all.

He was looking for herself, Hester knew—and hid closer behind the shade of a

large umbrella raised by one of her elderly lady companions to screen off the gentle spring sun. And yet, whilst hiding, Hester was vexed with Kenyon for not finding her out, never attempting to come to her ; so inconsistent is a woman's heart.

Religious party feeling ran high at Westcliff : good deeds were (as they should be) the special vocation of many unmarried or widowed women. Hester found herself unknowingly in such a group of right-minded but too narrow individuals.

‘You are one of us, Miss Armytage—you have joined the *great work*, I believe!’ said one of these.

Hester looked in helpless perplexity at the limp black dress and dowdy black straw bonnet of the speaker, which garments seemed to her exactly alike to those of all the other Dorcases around. She did not recognise who addressed her, not having a good eye for faces—nor had she an

idea of what was meant. Then she discovered that a visit lately to a sick fisherman in the old town was signified as her share in the great work: likewise a small gift of a worsted comforter and some tea and tobacco.

Hester was now eagerly pressed by other owners of limp black gowns, and bonnets that had no distinction in shabbiness to her puzzled eyes, to join further in the said great work. Grateful, yet bewildered, she accepted, feeling dimly it would be good to be taken out of herself now; good to make other poor creatures happy, though herself might not be so. Then whispered a voice—she could not distinguish whose, though she caught the words,

‘What *are* you asking? She is not one of us. Why, she is a Roman, and goes to chapel regularly.’

Wh-i-i-sh! on a sudden she startled, black-dressed sisterhood departed from

around Hester, and left her standing alone on the lawn, looking blankly after them.

Christopher Kenyon at last perceived her, and came up straight, with no laugh now on his lips, but a settled, resigned inquiry rather in the dark, wistful glance that, even while it sought Hester's sweet eyes for answer, looked away again with quick self-reminding that he ought not to claim even her looks too specially. He suspected Hester had been avoiding him, having caught glimpses of her at moments, only to lose her again when he made his often arrested way to where she had been. Now he would not vex her an instant—but it was best to see what she wished; that he would bow to in obedient submission.

‘I have been looking for you ever so long——’ he began, nervous and grave; ‘but perhaps you are, or have been, too

pleasantly engaged with your friends' (he looked round at the vanishing good women) 'to care to speak to me.'

'Do I not always like to talk with you——' answered Hester, quietly, in delicate reproach; no more—it was enough for both. Then she went on assuming lightness to re-establish their old relations, and rapidly sketched for him the late situation.

Christopher smiled with faintly returning humour.

'Human nature! it is the same everywhere. If our good friends had not chanced to be born as Protestants, they would have been excellent Roman Catholic sisters of charity. You are not hurt——?'

'Oh! no,' said Hester, heartily. 'I suppose I am a Catholic because my mother was one, and wished it.'

'A very good reason,' said Kit, gravely.

‘It would keep me a Mahommedan or a Buddhist.’

‘Besides,’ went on the girl, ‘they *are* good women! But why should they all dress so very, very shabbily—it is not a part of goodness, is it?’

Kit looked her up and down, amused, admiring, but a little regretfully.

‘You cannot understand it: being brought up more luxuriously—or, at least, with your innate sense of what is beautiful allowed free play. Now these good women would be far happier in a sister of charity’s costume if they only dared believe it! Yes,’ he went on, absently, talking while hardly knowing what he said, only feeling that he was beside Hester, yet must not touch on dearer subjects, ‘instead of limping lamely after the fashion they would be satisfied with their own appearance. I believe much of the almost painful humility of some good women

comes from the struggle between a rightful wish not to spend time or thought on clothes and the nervous discomfort of feeling badly dressed? . . . Will you come and have some tea in the house? . . . Now, you who spend a small fortune on your pretty dresses could never be happy in their gowns.'

'You always insist I must care only to be extravagant,' remonstrated Hester, very low.

A silence fell upon them both, as with steps so slow their feet seemed leaden-weighted they moved towards the house. There was a peep of the pretty red-tiled village through a break of screening trees and underwood, and by mute consent both stood still. The pause gave them so much longer time together—without seeming sought by either. So the two lovers both felt with distinctly beating hearts and tightening of the throat. Down lower

in the hamlet was a blacksmith's forge, whence the smiting clang of blows faintly reached their ears like a rough music of labour, while nearer and all around the birds were singing in their spring carols of gladness and idleness in woods and shrubbery. Neither ever after forgot that picture painted there and then on their memories for evermore, as some scenes linked with especial moments will come back to our minds with sweet pain; ay! when one forgets the words that were said, and when the love is long dead.

On one side of the Court rose a steep hill, with picturesque bare cliffs, crowned thick on the summit with noble firs. The other hill-side close behind the house was clothed with oak-woods, through which zigzag grassy paths were cut, temptingly leading upwards to the pleasant surprises of ever varying view-points, sudden turns, projecting rocks.

‘What a dear old place it is!’ said Hester.

‘Yes, a true Sleepy Hollow,’ answered Christopher; then, abruptly and low, ‘I shall go away from here soon.’

‘Why should you do that?’ retorted Hester, in a like constrained whisper, feeling a pain through her very soul. ‘You are not well yet, and this air suits you. *I* shall go away—yes, very soon!’

Silence again; then, as if drawn against their will, both moved on slowly towards the rest of the guests. The Court was a grand specimen of an old English house. Long and low, it nestled under the hill-side, with deep-bayed mullioned windows and walls mantled with old vines and magnolias. Inside, though some of its oak-pannelled rooms and its wide, shallow staircase were celebrated for their noble carvings; though it boasted a Charles II. bed-room and a priest’s hiding hole in the

thick walls; yet it was as cheerful, warm, and bright as any more modern mansion. All Westcliff and the country round took pride in the beautiful old house.

‘You have never seen the Court before?’ asked Kit, as they approached, and Hester murmured an ejaculation of praise. ‘It is my ideal of a delightful old house. Pity that my two cousins appreciate it so little! or were born my uncle’s sons, isn’t it? They hate the place, and come as seldom as possible here.’

‘What? not even to see that good old Sir Christopher! You are very like him, I think,’ said Hester, still with the small voice that means so much more to attentive ears than a louder, gayer one.

‘You think so? I am glad of it—I am fond of the dear old man. Do you remember in one of Bacon’s essays he says the Italians make little difference between

children and nephews, because these latter often resemble their uncles more than their own parents? But I forgot . . . you will hardly have read Bacon.'

'Not yet,' confessed Hester, humbly.

'I must go to see after some of these people: my time is not my own to-day. But still—come one little moment with me into the hall, and take just a glance upstairs at the old picture-gallery.'

Hester did so. The dark-panelled picture-gallery was hung with portraits of Kenyons from Tudor days; it was a long, well-lit chamber running above the drawing-rooms.

'How many of these ancestors of yours remind me of you!' uttered Hester, gazing at cavaliers and Georgian beaux; unconscious that often her own eyes heightened, or even imagined the likeness she saw between all the handsome, broad-browed, dark-featured Kenyons who haughtily gazed

down from the walls and this their true descendant at her side.

Kit looked well-pleased, however, for if not vain of his looks, he was proud of his family in his secret heart. He was certainly a singularly handsome man, too. Hester always seemed to see him long afterwards as he stood thus that spring afternoon, framed by a bay window; bronzed of face, a little weary or listless in attitude, but with the winning look she loved.

They could only stay there a few moments; then together they descended the black shallow stairs that were lit by a beautiful stained glass window. Hester, half pausing, looked back at the carved woodwork of the gallery, the bayed windows, the portraits let into the wainscot.

‘Yes; I have never seen any old house I liked so well.’

Kit sighed with a low nervous laugh.

‘Ah!’ said he, ‘*if it were mine——*’

Hester started. They went on again down the stairs, and, changing his tone to one of light self-mockery, Kit went on :

‘However, half-a-dozen people would have to die first. What a topsy-turvy world it is! when those who have the good things don’t appreciate their luck.’

Now they joined the other guests, who were admiring the hall, with its great fireplace and raised dais at the upper end. Mrs. Armytage quietly came up, placing herself at Hester’s side.

‘What a delightfully shadowy and *recessful* room this is!’ observed that best of women. ‘Yet I thought I saw a stray sunbeam just now, perhaps through that great window over the stairs; and it is hardly a spot for seclusion to-day, either. —What a crowd!’

Hester felt the affectionate warning tingle to her very finger-tips. She knew

now she had given fresh occasion for gossips to couple her name with that of Christopher by those few moments spent with him in the gallery ; how few—how sweet ! She knew, too, that she heeded naught of such petty merely social considerations : that whilst Kit was near she must speak to him, look at him, or secretly crave to hear his voice meant for herself only, feel his gaze on her through even her lowered eyelids, with a sick yearning that grew to almost intolerable strength whilst denied.

‘Aunt Bessie,’ she said, in a composed voice, as they presently stood apart, ‘don’t be vexed, please, but I do want to go home soon.’

‘What, now ! Oh, yes : very well, dear ! we’ll go at once.’

‘No, no—I don’t mean to Westcliff ! Let us stay this out to-day, please, to the end. I mean only that very soon, imme-

diately, I had better leave you—better go away up to the north.’

Some time later, Mrs. Armytage stood in one of the glass houses of the Court garden with Christopher Kenyon. Not a spot one would choose to talk sentiment in, with rows of pots full of small plants for summer ‘bedding-out’ around, though overhead the vines were spreading a mantle of tender green shoots. But when people are in great earnest what do surroundings matter?

‘I am very sorry, Kit; sorry for you both,’ Mrs. Armytage was saying. ‘Are you *quite* sure it must be as you say?—you two seemed made for each other.’

Despite himself, Kenyon’s face changed; a look of pain came into his eyes, his fingers nervously kept breaking a vine tendril into shreds.

‘I have told you all to the very root of the matter. I trust you now as I always

have, fully, utterly, more than my own miserable, vacillating self. For her own sake, I dare not ask Hester to link her fate with such a penniless, hopeless, helpless being as I am—I have been too selfish, but that would be to spoil her life indeed! Poor darling! to see *her* drooping, struggling, and pinching, feeling herself clogged by my existence, would drive me to insanity, I believe.’ His voice became husky, and he turned away abruptly. ‘There! think the worst of me you will, but at least believe that—that I love her with my whole heart, weak though it may be.’

‘But I don’t blame you, Kit!’ returned Bessie, softly. ‘The worst of you is, one never *can* blame you! I don’t know why.’

This was true of the many women and some men who knew Christopher Kenyon well, and were much attached to him. They were aware of his failings, feebleness

of purpose, even his sins! but the man must have been very loveable, for they always sought to excuse him, however sharp justice they meted to the faults of others, whom they should perhaps have loved as well in all fairness. It is often so; the prodigal is somehow dearer than his irreproachable elder brother.

The sun was sinking over the fir-wood above the cliff, as Hester and her aunt said good-bye to Kenyon at the gate.

‘Come and see me before I go away, will you?’ said Hester, her tone and manner so quiet that Kit thought to himself, part in bitter reproach, part relieved: ‘*She* does not care.’

‘Of course I will come,’ he assented, looking at her with half-seeing eyes suddenly invaded by inner visions, his thoughts darting along the track of this new, painful idea.

‘Come on Thursday, if you can,’ she as

calmly urged (inwardly resolving to leave on the Friday).

‘On Thursday—yes, if possible. I am not sure but that Mrs. Vignolles asked me on that day, but I will try,’ answered Kit, still absent, forecasting future sorrows morbidly, in which she should play a happy part.

Hester bit her lip.

‘Oh, Mrs. Vignolles——’

Then she bowed in graceful farewell again, and they went away. She could not divine Kenyon’s thoughts now; the sympathy between them was disturbed.

CHAPTER XI.

GOING AWAY.

ON the following Thursday, Hester was in the school-room with the children towards evening.

This was the hour at which Christopher had been used to come and see her—see *them*! she bitterly corrected her own thought. Better accustom herself henceforth not to think back on those happy visits as if she had any right to claim their sweetness as a secret and delightful tribute paid all for her own sake.

But the heart has two chambers, says a

German poet; one of joy, one of sorrow. And the two voices of these keep calling to each other, unless one sleeps. So the fairer, more joyous spirit in Hester's mind chid her now. Did she not *know* Kit loved her! Why should she rail against his fears and cares born of his poverty? Had he not told all his mind to Aunt Bessie, who, even while she sighed, did not quite blame him?

For Kenyon, that afternoon at the Court, had come later to Mrs. Armytage, his old friend, saying *peccavi*! in genuine self-accusation and contrition. Then, being received by no stern matron, but a sympathising, womanly heart, as of old, he had tried to let her know 'all about it;' the perplexities of love and vain regrets and wishes which tormented his poor heart. Only broken fragments of all these he succeeded in uttering in spasmodic bursts of genuine feeling; at other times he had simply looked

at Bessie miserable-eyed a moment and then away.

But she contrived to piece it all out. Kenyon was very poor; saddled, besides, with debts of long-standing from wilder days. His health had broken down of late in hot climates, made worse by the dread upon him lately of possibly being unable to follow *any* profession. He had no future prospects, no other outlooks: hope and he had been estranged for years. How could he ask Hester to share his future, perhaps worse fortunes; he who might be glad enough some day to have any lodging in which he might decently die?

In vain Bessie Armytage tried to put brighter hopes before him; to hint that Hester's love and companionship might dispel such morbid fears and fancies. Bessie herself and her husband had cheerily started out in the world together with

less in their pockets than Kenyon now owned; and had never regretted their hardness. How many more of his or her friends had done likewise—roughing it a while on the outset of their married voyage, certainly, but a brave and loving girl would not fear to face that! But this last was simply what Christopher could not be brought to realise in his own mind. To him, Hester was so far more beautiful and born to be cherished and lapped in purple and fine linen than all the instances of womankind whom Mrs. Armytage could adduce, that the idea of *her* roughing it, as they had, was to him painful, ridiculous, *impossible*.

In truth, Kit's own up-bringing in youth and the ideas he had unconsciously imbibed among rich and beautiful women at gay courts of what were the necessities of life to such, were to blame. Mrs. Armytage, who had gone gladly on the very

simple tenor of her way, could hardly have even imagined all such wants. But Kit, remembering well what even the 'dear dead women' of his own family had been accustomed to, could as little believe Hester happy as his wife with less. He looked on his own soldier days since as a rude and almost ascetic existence, which for a solitary bachelor was well enough; no more. And, while seeing Bessie Armytage, and the other friends she spoke of, struggling bravely through temporary trials and discomforts such as life must bring, but wealth may lighten, he had—they not knowing—pitied them intensely.

'No! to see *her* toiling and moiling, always obliged to save and pinch, broken down before her years!—it would make me mad! I have thought it over constantly in the dead of these past nights—looked at it every way by day, and all

day long I believe this month past. I wonder that my hair is not grey ; it *feels* as if it should be,' Kit had at last said, in a despairing tone, with a sigh so deep, so utterly hopeless, that Bessie pityingly could have found it in her heart to caress and comfort him as if he had been a dear brother.

So now Hester sat in the school-room—*waiting*: cheating herself with the pretence of being occupied with the children. Some of them she was helping to prepare their lessons ; others required her to nurse their dolls whilst they were busied with the heavy duties of feeding and stabling all the animals of a Noah's ark. Half-past four ! and she had been waiting since four with outward seeming calm, though her heart had given a jump at each knock at the door. He must be here soon—Hester tried to steady her pulses and correct an exercise written apparently with a blud-

geon that smeared and blotted in an ink-thirsty way painful to behold.

‘Bertie dear—I don’t quite understand,’ she said, puzzled, to the small sailor-dressed writer, who stood beside her with the air of a convict who has done his day’s spell. And Hester slowly began to decipher through the blots, till at last these words straggled to light :

‘Hary has a knew grate cote made of gra clorth of witch he is very prode. Lusy has got blew ribons in her bonet and a brown fever’ (feather).

Patiently she began to correct, smothering a sigh, because that a quarter of an hour had passed while her small galley-slave once more wet his oar sorrowfully in a fresh sea of ink.

‘Oh ! he doesn’t spell good enough. Look at my copy, Cousin Hester,’ urged a second urchin, thrusting another scrawl into her hands hotly. And Hester, feeling

like a decipherer of lost languages, went on painfully to discover that,

‘Wollen closes are for winter wair,
cottain and linnen closes are for the
sumer.’

Five o’clock struck now. Kenyon seldom came after five, the walk out to the Court being some distance, and the dinner-hour here early. Hester was ready to cry ; still it was yet possible he might come late ; she would be very patient. So she sat on among the children with a deadened sick feeling at heart.

‘Hear me my lessons,’ piped a voice at her knee, that of one of the small fry hitherto not described.

‘Why, boy, you don’t do any lessons,’ she gravely replied, her arms full of three dolls, a woolly sheep, and a squeaking rabbit she was desired to hold.

‘Yes, boy does ; Ishabess makes me,’ he returned, aggrieved.

‘What lessons does Elizabeth make you say, dear?’ asked Hester, trying to force her attention to those who had a rightful claim to it.

‘*Payers!*’ said the small man.

The minutes passed, passed; then came a loud ring at the door. Hester half started up, and, whilst her heart was still beating rapidly, the door opened to admit Uda, just home from evening school.

‘Oh! Cousin Hester, who do you think I saw a little while ago?’ she began, coming up with an important air of having an agreeable piece of intelligence. Hester knew, even before Miss Gertrude eagerly went on. ‘It was Captain Kenyon, and he was coming out of Mrs. Vignolles’ house.’

Hester turned sick with disappointment, but contrived to ask, quietly,

‘Do you think he is coming here, then?’

‘Oh! no—not here. He was going to-

wards the Court ; but he stopped, of course, to speak to me, and said it was too late this evening, but he would come and see mother some day soon.'

Some day soon—and Hester was leaving to-morrow ! Poor Hester ! she made a dash at the baby, who was contentedly crawling on the rug, and under the pretext of carrying Nona upstairs escaped from the room and Uda's sharp observation. She covered the infant's soft head with kisses mingled with bitter tears. Nona catching one glimpse of her weeping face began to whimper too, till soothed by Hester with more caresses and kisses that relieved her passionate emotion. Luckily the baby could not talk yet—could not betray the secret of that grief.

Presently, while Hester was alone in her room, came a knock at the door, and her aunt's voice almost timidly asking, could she help her in packing ? Hester let her

in, but even Aunt Bessie hardly knew what to say, though she made that little much. It was all a mistake to-day; and how many others had passed through such trials as Hester's, and been happy; the future might be yet rich with blessing. Nevertheless, after bravely facing the ordeal of supper with the boys (all eager to talk to her especially this last evening), Hester passed a sleepless night that to her, so unused to sorrow, was terrible. Sometimes she accused herself; why, why had her pride prevented her from letting Christopher know she was going away, and that they might possibly see each other's faces no more?

Again she tortured her jealous heart with the surmise that he had driven out one nail by another—that he had been looking this evening in Mrs. Vignolles' quick small eyes as he had used to do in *hers*. And then again it was fate, fate, fate!

‘How terribly sorry Hester seems to leave us, mamma. Isn’t it quite trying she feels it so much,’ whispered Uda next morning, looking at her cousin’s pale face and heavy eyelids swollen in spite of her pains.

‘Good-bye, Cousin Hester, good-bye,’ the voices of nearly all the Armytage tribe were crying, as she looked out at her group of relatives from the train.

Then Edward Armytage, who had gone to buy some newspapers for their young household goddess at the last moment, rushed back, and, jumping at his peril on the carriage step as it began to move, eagerly whispered,

‘I say! he’s just hurried into the station, looking about him everywhere. Kenyon; you know! There he is—look out and say good-bye; do, like a good girl. Oh, too late——!’ For a porter

or two had caught hold of poor Edward's coat-tails, and his boyishly eager efforts to right a romance he felt was somehow ending wrong were frustrated.

Hester did look—she could not help it, notwithstanding pride—and thought she saw Kit pressing through a crowd: that was all.

CHAPTER XII.

‘ TO EVERY BIRD ITS NEST IS FAIR.

SOME six or seven weeks later, when long, long days of long spring hours had gone slowly by, and May was in its sweetest prime—when all the earth was gay with new foliage, with flowers everywhere in the glorious profusion that even summer cannot boast, and when in the woods and thickets were pipings and such small sounds of young living creatures and newly-fledged birds peeping out in surprise at the world—Hester stood leaning over a stile one afternoon.

It was far from Westcliff; she stood in a land of lakes and mountains up in the North country. Great mountains lay around her, that might have almost terribly given the impression of shutting one in, like huge earthen ramparts of a fortress, but for the lighter airy ideas conveyed by clouds sometimes, veiling those stern summits with rolling veils of whiteness and brightness, at other times floating down their sides in filmy wreaths.

Somewhat thus the angel messengers must have seemed to the seers' eyes who beheld them coming down to earth in patriarchal days; or, as one might fancy, did the form of a passing god or goddess show, rising from Mount Ida's woody sides to the realms of Jove.

Oh! the free life, the happy days that Hester had always known there from her petted childhood—till now! Standing thus on some high rock point in those

bygone days, young Hester had often felt tempted to cry aloud for pure joy like one of the eagles sailing overhead, to dance on the dizzy edge in ecstasy of spirit. But now she stood there quite still, leaning on the bar of the stile, as she had leant just as motionless and heavily for nearly an hour. Poor Hester . . . !

‘If I could only go away and be among new people and in new places, and *forget!*’ she said once to herself, with a stir of restlessness. Immediately she added, in self-reproach, however, ‘No, no; the dear old people would send me at once if they guessed I had any wish; but grandfather is *not* well . . . If he stumbled again and had a worse fall than last week—it may have been giddiness, and no mere accident . . . Yes; I must stay quietly and do my duty by them.’

Hester looked paler by far than when at Westcliff, with an almost appealing expres-

sion in the slight droop of her long, dark-pencilled eyebrows, in the soft, pitiful curves her lips had newly learnt in place of smiles; very touching on her young bright face, had anyone been there to see.

She was craving, wearying for news of Christopher, but in vain. Letters came almost daily from Mrs. Armytage, dashed off in haste amongst her many cares, telling of the children, of Westcliff gossip, of her own plans for going to India in autumn, and leaving her flock in various folds (at which, no doubt, her heart silently ached a little). But the only news of Kenyon was, that soon after Hester's sudden flight he had said he was tired of Westcliff, and so departed to London. Not a word more. With momentary bitterness Hester thought to herself: Yes, gone to London, and he is gay there, no doubt! Of course it was dull at Westcliff, now, *with no one to flirt with!*—and Mrs. Vignolles went also to

town. Then her generous nature would reassert itself and cast forth the evil, small, intruding thoughts. Ah! perhaps he was restless and unhappy, too. At that thought insensibly hope flickered again in her heart, and fancy would vaguely conjure up dreamy scenes of future happiness in years to come. Years were so full of possibilities, despite present harsh fate.

As Hester stood, the milk-white blossoms of the May clustered close about her head, its rich scent was heavy on the air. Beyond the stile a small upland meadow sloped steeply down, all speckled with daisies and buttercups; sheep were browsing here with steady nibble, while their lambs bleated and frisked. Hester knew them each and all; dumb creatures had been her friends and playmates during her often solitary childhood. A track led downwards through the meadow to a pretty cottage at the foot of the hill. Little more

than its gables and steep-pitched roof were visible from here, it was so hidden by oak-trees. But on nearer view, the Nest, as it was called, was set in a tiny garden of which the flowers seemed lovingly creeping up to its walls in serried ranks of such pansies and carnations as no other house near or far could boast, while jessamine and roses embraced the very eaves with fragrant trails. This was the home of her childhood, her grandfather's house.

Beyond the cottage and its trees shimmered a wide mountain-lake, fringed with little rocky capes, sandy bays, and reedy margins. The view from the stile, framed in branches, showed three mountains ending the lake. One softly wooded for the greater part in rolling curves of greenery; the next, that lay a little behind it, rising in high lawns and slopes only broken here and there by bosky ridges; while the hindmost, seen between his fellows, raised

his huge head to the skies in naked granite grandeur.

Then, through the sound of the cropping sheep and the drone of bees and the birds' chirping, a step approaching down the path behind her fell on Hester's ear. She raised her head and listened. A little behind in the oak coppice was a path taken as right-of-way by stray village-folk passing; but this comer had left it, and was approaching by a side walk through a wild laurel shrubbery, used by few or none but the inmates of the cottage. The girl stood up straight and tall, expectant strangely, she knew not why. A man turned the corner of the path from behind a great hawthorn bush—Christopher Kenyon himself.

He gave a sudden exclamation and stopped—Hester uttered a little cry. Then both approaching, as if impelled by some mutual strong power that made

their faces eager and set, but their feet slow, they silently held each other's hands, looked in each other's eyes, till, with a long-drawn sigh, Kenyon uttered a strange greeting.

‘I did not know if I should see you.’

‘Then why—what has brought you here to this country?’

‘I hardly know . . . you will think still less of me, if I were to confess,’ Kit replied, with an uneasy, forced laugh; then, in a subdued tone—‘But, you know, I missed saying good-bye to you at West-cliff, after all, and that was a lapse which needed reparation.’

‘Still you say, you have *not* come to see me.’

‘You unbelieving little Jew! I said I did not know if I should see you. But—at least—I thought I could see the home you used to tell me of; see your own self, it might be, from afar, if only a glimpse

of you flitting through the trees . . . And besides,' (went on Kit, changing his tone to that of a would-be indifferent admirer of scenery, while looking around), 'this is a charming country, and it seemed a pity never to have seen it.'

Hester was not taken in, however; in a low voice full of emotion, she uttered, reproachfully,

'You ought to have written to tell me—we might have missed each other. I should never have known.'

As troubled as herself, at that sound of deep feeling in her tones to which inner chords in himself vibrated, Kenyon humbly sought excuse.

'If you want to know the truth, the whole truth, I did not know myself till yesterday. I was travelling elsewhere, a hundred miles from here. (I am due there now.) All at once in the train the thought seized me not to go on, but to

change and come up here instead. We were nearing a junction in half-an-hour; and I passed the time in such utter indecision that it became positive agony. (Irresolution is the most painful state to me, and yet since I have been ill it is almost worse to force myself to the task of any conclusion.) Will you believe what I did at last . . . *I tossed up a shilling!*—you are not angry?’

Hester could not repress a soft smile.

‘It is quite what I can imagine—angry?’
no; go on.’

‘Well, there is little more to tell. At the junction I jumped out—almost lost my luggage, as the other train was just starting; had no time for a fresh ticket, and nearly drove the porters and a guard wild . . . walked over this morning from your little town beyond there’ (pointing towards the nearest mountain), ‘and, behold, here I am.’

Hester only said, with gentlest compassion of feeling,

‘You must be very tired—it was too far for you. We should not dream of anyone doing it, but of course you could get no conveyance to hire. Come and sit down for a few minutes’ rest now.’

Wearily enough, it must be owned, Kit sat down as she desired. A fallen tree had been made into a rude seat close by, and, as in former days, they two were seated side by side.

CHAPTER XIII.

‘GOOD-BYE, DEAR LOVE, GOOD-BYE.’

FOR a delicious time, as they sat on the log, Hester and Kenyon found it enough to look at each other, or else to talk by brief snatches—but not of love.

In the overwhelming happiness of seeing Christopher, hearing his voice, breathing the same air, Hester asked no more. And yet in her heart’s core was a small, cold icicle; it was hope frozen there by his words. She would not suffer the sensation to appear on the surface, to chill her reception of his dear self—after coming so

far too !—but bravely tried to keep it hidden away with the help of pride. Afterwards it might have its way ; women have leisure enough to weep.

But they talked of all both had done and seen in the days past, since they last parted. Hester always used to tell Kit of the least thing she cared for, almost as if he were twined with her own mind, and must needs therefore care. Only of her most inner feelings of all she said nothing—perhaps he knew. He had an almost feminine intuition for what was passing in the minds of those he cared for ; and now, with his dark-grey eyes riveted on Hester's speaking face, torment herself to the utmost, she could not doubt he was intensely interested even to hear of her old bullfinch's death, and how her specially pet-flowers were prospering.

‘And you—it is your turn now,’ Hester ventured at last, with prettily-apologetic

inquiry and pleading eyes. 'You have told me what you did lately' (he had been visiting other relatives and had not seen Mrs. Vignolles; the gods be thanked for that!) 'but you have not told me what your plans are now for the summer, the good time of the year.'

'I take no interest in this summer—none,' Kit slowly replied, looking down at the still lake, with further-seeing vision. 'I shall not see this spring's fruition—I wonder when, if ever, I shall pass another summer in England? . . . It seems a sin to leave this fresh, green land, does it not? but I am going far enough soon.'

'Where—?' asked Hester, turning very cold now.

'To—I hardly know where yet. But Barbadoes or Jamaica most likely, where it will be hotter than even your summer. To some place, any way, where existence seems a vacuum, and, if *that* palls, yellow

fever will kindly step in and end one's querulous surmises as to that mystery—why one was made to be.'

'Shall we go down to my home? . . . I—I should like you to rest, and to see my old grandfather and grandmother. They are very old, but still they would be hurt if I told them you were here and—had not gone to see them,' murmured Hester.

She was really swallowing tears: only as yet she kept them down from rising to their fountains in her dove-like eyes. Kit rose to obey her wish, feeling mechanically that to do *any* behest of hers then, if it were plunging in the lake, to do her the smallest pleasure would be a welcome relief from this grievous joy of being so near her, and yet—so far. Hester led him through the shrubbery (the meadow path leading too familiarly to the out-houses of the little cottage), and preceded him down some rough steps of soil and edging stones.

She had not come here for months (not since before the Ave Maria of Christmas had been sung in Westcliff), and winter frosts had loosened the stones. Half-blinded with mental pain, Hester never heeded her footing till a stone rolled from under her, and, with a cry, she fell some little distance on to the path below. It seemed the very next instant that Kit (though he had been behind her) was lifting her tenderly up, and holding her in his arms.

‘Are you hurt? are you much hurt?’

Oh! it was such a relief to Hester to cry; to cry heartily and let the salt tears pour down unchecked, whilst Christopher imagined it was all for that aching foot. She leant her head against the rough brown tweed of Kenyon’s coat and quietly cried, whilst he petted her, and hardly knew what to do or say for her comfort. Then he kissed her—Kit meant it to be

just once ; but immediately after he kissed her again and yet again, calling her in broken accents his poor darling, his little love ! . . .

‘ Oh ! Hester,’ he exclaimed, in passionate despair, his barriers of prudence and self-restraint broken down. ‘ *Dear Hester*, if only I were a little better off—if only I dared risk it to ask you to marry me, now—at once !—how happy our lives might be.’

She answered him close and quick, with warm vehemence in her breath, her true soul going out to him.

‘ I am willing to marry you now, Christopher—poor as you are ! There, what woman can say more ?’

A groan was wrung from poor Kenyon’s very soul. That was all of gladness Hester’s words brought him, as his arms slowly relaxed and bead-drops stood on his brow, while his eyes quitted gazing on her

dear head and the tip of a delicate ear to wander vacantly over the blue unfeeling expanse of sky. He had known it! Should he—should he not—bless her generous words . . . to her hurt (never mind his own!) No—no! Dear child, to her it all seemed so easy and happy; love in a cottage and the rest of it, despite small means. But he who knew more of the world, and wants of life!—he who knew his own habits, if not extravagant yet easy hitherto, and her girlish ignorance, recklessness of cost—he stood appalled at the miseries he might bring down on that shapely small head, bow with care those dear and lovely shoulders. Oh! poor, poor child, why could he not have left her sooner at Westcliff? The man impotently hated his own vanity at the outset, then bewailed his fatal irresolution, nay, infatuation!

Almost soundlessly he uttered,

‘I dare not, for your sake.’

Hester started from his side, passionately, as if a hot iron had branded her.

‘If you really loved me, you would not say that.’

Christopher simply looked at her: his nether lip twitched slightly.

‘Very well,’ he replied, in an altered voice, ‘we will say that is it. I do not care for you sufficiently—you know I always told you there was no reliance to be placed on me.’

Hester trembled, not knowing what to answer. She believed, nay, *knew* he loved her indeed sufficiently, ay, and far more! Each ardent glance, every tender tone of his voice had whispered it. But she could not tell him so. Or was it indeed true that Kenyon did not really rightly love her? Was he one of those men, hard at their heart’s core, but with surface emotions so easily stirred that they deceive

those who do not know them thoroughly into pitying their sorrows, or expatiating on their delightful joyousness?

Why had he kissed her, then, at West-cliff; owned his love? Her woman's pride agonised, the girl leant for support still against some rockwork ending the steps, looking in misery at the drooping slender boughs of a white-stemmed birch that hung before her. This was the bitterest moment of Hester's life. Whatever might come afterwards, standing there doubting Kenyon's honour and loyalty was keenest pain of all. Ever after, to see such a mist of tangled birch-branches brought thoughts of tears to her mind, though memory often failed to tell her for a short time why. Then she heard Kenyon say, hoarsely,

‘Good-bye—try some day to forgive me for paining you by this last selfish folly of coming here to-day.’

Hester slowly roused at that; and her

accents sounded softly loving as of old in his surprised ears.

‘The only pain you gave me, was by maligning yourself just now *Dear Christopher*, do you want me to forgive you for giving me this day’s gladness, or—or for your troubles that are my sorrow too? If there *were* anything, of course I would forgive you to seventy times seven! but all I have to say now is—God bless you!’

Next instant Hester found herself once more caught close to Christopher’s breast, passionately, despairingly.

‘My love, my dearest!—if I only could do *anything*, give up the rest of my life to buy you an hour’s joy! My life!—pah, that is not worth much. You are the only person living who perhaps thinks it of value, little dear one Oh! if in the years to come brighter days could dawn for me, and that I might come back and

find you here ! But I am a fool ! they *never* will. Be happy, Hester dear, may you be rich and happy, and gladden some better man's life—and forget me. I trust you will.'

Kenyon, as he spoke, was battling with a ridiculous lump in his throat that would rise as big as an egg, it seemed. He vainly tried to choke it with a cough, but failed, and broke down sobbing. Hester was frightened, but crept closer to him, soothed, consoled him : till with a strong effort he recovered himself.

'No, no ; but you,' she murmured, then, —'you may be happy some day with some other.'

'Never ! I shall never ask any woman to marry me—you or none. Farewell, Hester ; it is the only last kindness I can do you, to go.'

Silently they stood there in close embrace, Hester with her head so lovingly,

so sorrowfully resting for this once, this last time, above Kit's beating heart. She suffered far less than he; her part was but to accept, be resigned; she only felt, now, that she was in his arms, that they loved and must part——

But to him the struggle was still terrible. A cloud of privations, miseries, fears seemed to hang over his future. *And he did not feel strong enough in mind or body to face them!* How could he do Hester such a wrong as to ask her to share all this; perhaps to bear even more than himself in future? With a tender but convulsive movement he pressed her tightly to him, feeling it the last time on earth, then gently left her standing alone.

‘Will you not come to the house first? —you will be so fatigued with the long walk back,’ asked Hester, in a half dead voice; yet ever thoughtful of his health, his wants.

‘No, thanks ; no—I would rather not see anyone just now,’ he hastily murmured.

Cramming his hat down over his eyes, Kenyon went a few hurried paces away. At the top of the steps he halted, hesitated, looked once more round. Hester, almost in spite of herself, made a little entreating gesture with her hand, then stayed herself in rebuke. Christopher smiled at her with loving wistfulness : gave a sorrowful shake of his head, as slight as her own motion towards himself. Then he was gone.

Gone ! and presently Hester found herself walking through the narrow paths of their hedged-in garden-plot up to the door of the Nest. Out ran a trim maid to meet her.

‘Oh ! Miss Hester, we have been looking for you everywhere. Don’t be alarmed ! but your grandfather——’

‘What, what—?’

‘He has had an attack of giddiness and a sort of faint. It passed off, and he is sleeping now quite nicely, but we’ve sent for the doctor. We looked everywhere for you; but your grandmamma quite scolded us, and said it was nothing, and why frighten you home. But we knew you would want to know.’

CHAPTER XIV.

‘ONE WOE DOTH TREAD UPON ANOTHER’S
HEELS.’

HESTER ARMYTAGE had heavy work on her young shoulders that evening.

On going into her grandfather’s study, some time after she returned back, and whilst he still slept, restlessly urged by a desire to do *something* for him, if only to see that his writing-bureau was duly locked and the window closed before the evening breeze came over the lake—and his blind terrier Buz not too lonely—she saw an open letter on blue business-looking

paper under the old man's arm-chair. Hester picked it up, and was laying it on the table, when some words in it caught her eye. She started—read all, and stood confused yet awestruck, vaguely seeming to understand some calamity impending. A North-country bank had failed, payment was stopped—what did it mean? Hester knew so little of business matters, she was absolutely ignorant of what bank her grandfather might have money in, or how his income accrued to him. Still she put the letter hastily in her pocket, and retired to join her grandmother, who was sitting in one of the pretty bed-rooms of the cottage by the side of her husband.

The old man lay sleeping heavily, yet apparently calmly. His old wife sat obstinately resisting all attempts to coax her away, yet placidly enough in an arm-chair by his pillow. He was over eighty; as was she. With a lace veil over her

white hair tied under her chin, a woollen shawl knitted by Hester on her shoulders, she sat a venerable picture all that afternoon and evening with her hands in her lap, sometimes dozing, too.

It was sundown before the doctor, riding over the hills from a distant dale, had reached the little home by the lake-side, where he was anxiously awaited by the young girl. Later, taking Hester aside and meeting her troubled eyes with grave pity, he broke it to her gently there was no hope. Her grandfather was suffering from concussion of the brain, caused by his fall.

The doctor and Hester were alone, for the old lady would not leave her husband, even then; remarking with the feeble voice and slow calm of age, that there was not much amiss—and the child would take all directions. Hester clasped her hands with tearless awed dread in the gathering

shadows, whilst the great, coldest shadow of all, that of the wings of Death's angel, for the first time that she remembered, seemed to draw solemnly and silently close around that little household.

At last, struck by some thought, she tremblingly pulled out the letter from her pocket. Could this have been to blame in her grandfather's sudden illness? He had fallen before, but that was a mere accident, while this—— The doctor, an old family friend, started.

‘God help you all, my poor child,’ he uttered in dismay, as he gazed blankly at the letter and then aghast at Hester. ‘The bank failed! and all my small savings in it too—but that’s little in comparison of what this means to you, your grandmother, all your uncles and aunts——’

‘Is it ruin?’ asked the girl, bravely, staring at him with a dull feeling. What did ruin matter? what was it? what matter-

ed anything but parting as in death from those we loved in life?

‘Well . . . well . . . well ! There need be no such word as ruin, my dear, to anyone, young and strong and blest with gifts like yours. And the rest of your family—anyhow, they’ve all got their professions, or husbands, to support them. But it’s a sore blow !’

And so, trying to comfort Hester with more hasty words, the old doctor hurried away to see after his own business with a sinking heart ; yet he would have stayed could it have been of any avail. As a last kindness he promised to telegraph to Bessie Armytage, the only one of the numerous sons and daughters of the good old people who was not far away scattered in colonies or distant lands.

Weighted with her message of death, Hester walked heavily back to her grandfather’s room, and there, kneeling down

beside her grandmother, silently caressed her. The old woman slowly examined the girl's features, and asked, in a hushed voice, not to disturb her sleeping spouse.

‘What did he say, dear?’

‘He said grandfather was very ill,’ repeated Hester, feeling choked; ‘but that—’

‘Eh, but what? Speak louder, child; I can’t hear.’

‘That he would not suffer any pain; none at all, grannie, and that is such a comfort, isn’t it?’ went on the girl, confused, not knowing what to say indeed.

‘Very ill . . .’ repeated the grandmother, slowly to herself, shaking her snowy-haired head. ‘Very ill . . . well, well; the will of God be done . . . yes. Lead me away, child—there is a buzzing in my head, and I had better lie down, too.’

They gently helped the old lady to her bed in the adjoining room; and there, without complaining more than that she

felt a little strange, she too became heavily unconscious.

Through the small hours Hester watched, feeling her burden of sorrow too great to realise; only aware she must watch the clock, keep up the fire, have medicines and cordials all ready for a change, and such small details. Once her grandfather roused, and, with a gleam of surprised pleasure, recognised her bending anxiously over him.

‘I seem to have had a bad dream, child—something about money lost. My head is confused. I thought—thought it would come hard on you all . . . all you children. Eh, what was it?’ he asked, in bewildered, broken inquiry.

‘It was nothing to signify, dear grandfather. It will not hurt any of us, indeed. Be quite happy—all is well with us, as all things always are governed for the best,’ assured Hester, forcing herself to cheerfulness as she soothingly replied.

The old man smiled at that, hardly catching her words, yet reassured by that brave young voice piercing the mists which gently clouded his intellect, as sleepfulness still kindly hung over his bodily faculties.

‘All *is* well—yes, well!’ he murmured, quite content; then turned his face to the wall, and so, before an hour had passed, fell on sleep like a patriarch who had lived to a good old age.

And Hester, while awe-struck, thought to herself, in the first strange moments afterwards, she was glad to know death could come like that—most thankful he had departed happy.

When the old grandmother awoke, she asked immediately after her husband. They had to tell her the truth; but she took the news most quietly, to their surprise.

‘He is gone a little before me,’ she only

said. Then, after a while, added, with a placid smile, 'But I shall follow him very soon. We never were long parted, and I feel drawing near my death, too.'

After this she seemed again to relapse into a half-sleeping state, whether caused by exhaustion after the shock or from sympathy with him who had been her other self so many long years. This last Hester was ready to believe; herself seeming stupefied and moving in some awful, solemn dream in which all things were crumbling away from around her—lives and love and fortune—and she left standing alone in the world. Death itself seemed no longer terrible, however, and, as to present pain, *feeling* seemed suspended, she could only note facts. By that second afternoon two aged, still corpses lay in the little lake-side Nest; two loving and gentle spirits had gone together from earth to the state they were prepared for.

That evening, when Bessie Armytage arrived, Hester threw herself into the arms that were outstretched to her with most pitying sorrow and love, and then, on that kind and comforting bosom, wept for the first time during the late hours of trial.

‘Oh, Aunt Bessie, Aunt Bessie,’ she sobbed, as both mingled their tears over the happy dead whom yet neither could wish back, ‘they were like what David says, “lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in death they were not divided.” But it seems so lonely now they are gone—and *he* is gone! Only perhaps that is for the best, for I am quite a beggar now, and I should only have been a hindrance to him.’

‘My dear . . . my poor, poor child!’ was all Bessie found to say, feeling acutely herself the loss of the beloved old parents; knowing vaguely she herself must be now

considerably poorer, and could help this young creature, whom she soothingly caressed, so much the less.

CHAPTER XV.

‘YEA OR NAY?’

SOME months had passed.

In the early spring of the next year a young girl, dressed in poor but neat mourning, was sitting lonely on a bench in Regent's Park. Her eyes were fixed in an absent glance on a sickly little girl trundling a hoop, for this child was her charge as its nursery governess. But Hester's thoughts—for Hester Armytage it was who thus sat—were troubling, bewildering her; trying to reason themselves out to some definite conclusion on a

very different matter. It was hard to think it out, and see what was right; for every few minutes the child would stray too far, or threaten mischief in all manner of elfish ways—owning the unhappy combination of being spoilt besides the peevishness of ill-health. The matter to be considered was such a great one, affecting perhaps the whole of two lives in future; but the child was the duty nearest, and that must not be neglected.

It was a cold grey London day in early March. No blue sky or blessed sunshine to be seen. Alone, alone in this great town! felt the poor young governess. There was no living soul to care for her in the numberless houses, the millions of busy human beings all around her in London, *except*—— For Mrs. Vignolles, her employer—Hester's lips tightened a little at thought of that lady—would little heed getting another to supply a vacant place

in the school-room, nor would Louisa, the child, regret the excitement of a change, though neither disliked Hester more than any such necessary household intruder. Hester Armytage felt desolate, cold to her heart's core, but still doubtful.

As to how the girl came here, that may be briefly told. After her grand-parents' death, and the loss of her own small fortune, together with that suffered by all the rest of the family in their several incomes, Hester had bravely declared she would work for herself and be a burden to none of the various aunts and uncles who all would have willingly tried to give her a home, despite narrowed means. In vain Bessie Armytage, in especial, had begged her to wait, if possible, and—'next year, yes! certainly next year John and I can well contrive to pay your passage out to us in India. Oh, my child, I *could* even

do it this year, if you would but listen to reason—I really could.’

Yes, but Hester knew too well how it would be managed ; at what secret cost to the kindly woman, and so refused. Then, to put an end to further discussion, she applied to some of her former acquaintances in London to find her a situation. These persons happening to know Mrs. Vignolles, the latter wrote some time later, to Hester’s surprise, offering (almost as if Miss Armytage was a complete stranger) the post of governess to her little girl. It was the only situation to be heard of, and—even without consulting her aunt—Hester, in her generous eagerness to support herself, accepted it.

Bessie Armytage was a good deal troubled when she heard the news, but it was then too late. Besides, she had no good reason to give for refusing her con-

sent. Perhaps she guessed, too, inwardly sighing, that Hester had some faint hopes of gleanings occasionally news of Kenyon in her new home. Yet she had an uncomfortable suspicion that Emma Vignolles, her old schoolfellow, to whom she had not been very warm during certain doubtful flirtations of that little person's in past days, was not sorry now to appear condescending towards Bessie's niece.

There was a step on the gravel. Looking up, the poor girl saw as she expected (though yet feeling half afraid) Mr. Hungerford, who was Mrs. Vignolles' cousin, standing over her. He has been already described as being struck at first sight with Hester's appearance at that Westcliff ball where she and Kenyon for the first time were unhappy together. Alas, for the bygone days !

Mr. Hungerford looked at Hester with an agreeable smile lighting up his pale,

clearly-cut face that appeared so beardlessly juvenile at a little distance, but elderly near. His spare, tall figure was still very active, however, and he had undoubtedly the whole appearance of a well-bred gentleman. His voice had a peculiarly sonorous and musical ring as of a rarely excellent human instrument. It was a really delightful voice when he pleased, and he knew its power.

‘Well, I have come for my answer,’ he said, with courteous kindness and an assured smile, which Hester caught, though it was quickly suppressed. Her spirit rose against it. Yet, ah! she was so homesick, lonely, tired in body as in mind. Her hitherto listless eyes suddenly flashed at him : they were like grey brilliants.

‘You think I should be eager to marry you, Mr. Hungerford, because I am almost a pauper, now—a servant, at least, in all but name. But remember, if you please,

that I have taken a week to make up my mind.'

'Foolish child! You have too romantic, high-flown ideas,' he answered, looking keenly at her; noticing with amused interest that was quite a new relish, almost a pleasure, the expressive play of emotion in her honest young face. 'By the way, has anyone told you, I wonder—not that you will consider it has anything to do with the matter—that I am rich, Miss Armytage? Why, my cousin, Mrs. Vignolles, would bless her lucky star'—(he stopped himself abruptly, but went on so glibly the break in the sentence was hardly perceptible)—'if she had married as rich a man in her deceased spouse.'

'That *has* nothing to do with it, Mr. Hungerford. It ought not to have, and therefore it has not,' retorted Hester, still in a white heat of pure high feeling that had flamed up within her.

‘And therefore *it has not!*’ assented the rich man slowly, in a tone that might have been mocking or critical with the least more emphasis. Secretly he asked himself, while searching her face still more closely: ‘Was it true? And, if so, would it last long?’ Then with kindling warmth, in growing excitement of voice, he went on, speaking by degrees faster and faster, though each word was emphatic in that clear enunciation. ‘Almost a servant? Quite so: more than one! Have I not seen it since you arrived, three months ago, at my cousin’s house? You are harried, worried, kept slaving from morning till night, and for miserable wages? Have you one bare short hour that you dare call your own in the whole day, or even night? Ah! I suspect you *do* steal some from your sleep, for the soft round of your cheeks is beginning to hollow—that I have noticed lately—and you used to carry your figure so

uprightly, with a springing step that I admired from the first—but you go slower, yes, slower these days.’

‘Oh, what does that matter now?’ Hester sighed, quite forgetting that the man beside her admired the face and figure with which she no longer felt as if she cared to please.

She was only thinking he said truth about the want of even a mere half-hour’s freedom, which she sighed for with resigned helpless gentleness at nights when mending Mrs. Vignolles’ lace flounces after some ball with dainty painstaking fingers, by way of a pleasant, light evening employment, said that lady. But the speech sounded so strangely on Hester’s fresh young lips that Hungerford looked at her surprised; its tone was so evidently sincere.

‘*Poor girl!*’

Hungerford said the words so softly,

in a quiet pitying voice, that Hester felt a sudden gush of tears rise as in former days to her eyes. They did her good; her heart seemed unfrozen: sympathy is so dear to women. The man beside her seized his advantage.

‘Come, dear; make up your mind to marry me, and you shall leave all this life behind you. I am not very young, but I am not an old man yet; and I can give you everything that ought to make a woman happy. You shall live a life of ease; and have as many dresses as you please; and may laugh at Mrs. Vignolles—who will be green with envy. You need not even ask her to your parties unless you like. *I don’t care.*’

He laughed himself, but Hester cried out in pain.

‘No, no; you won’t see that I ought not to do it for that reason. I must not marry you because I am miserable, any more

than because you are rich. It would be wrong.'

'What would be right, then?' said Hungerford, knitting his brows a moment unseen by her, and feeling, though the contest had fascinated him by its apparently somewhat doubtful issue, it might be tiresome if protracted too long. He had a restless secret wish to look at his watch, for there was a deeply interesting scientific appointment to be held about this very hour, too, but he would not leave without victory; no, certainly not. 'What would be right, little one?' he repeated, softly, with a sigh, resting his arm on the back of the bench and feasting his eyes with real admiration, and even the light of passion, on Hester's lovely face half averted; desire growing hot in him to possess her for his own. He dared not try further endearments, she had shrunk too sensitively from him on a previous occa-

sion. 'I have not spoken much to you of my love, it is true, hitherto; but now I will—! I *do* love you, Hester; I want you for my own and must have you. Why should I not? There is nothing and no one between us? You are so young, and have lived nearly always among your beloved lakes and mountains, as you told me; you can have had few opportunities of meeting many others . . . Ha! you are blushing! What is it? So there *was* some one, eh?'

'There was; but pray never speak of it again; it is over and done with,' said Hester, firmly, though inwardly much moved. 'Remember I did go out into society, for at least part of two seasons' (She did not remind him of Westcliff, yet even while speaking wondered was it a base prevarication). 'I was not always a governess, you know.'

'A nursery governess, yes; and few men

now, let me tell you, would make such an offer to a governess—hardly one in my position,’ exclaimed Mr. Hungerford, roughly though honestly, his wide blue eyes gleaming with passion, or was it mere excitement? Hester was so inexperienced she was not certain. ‘But this man, who is he? Where was he? Are you waiting for him?’

‘Ask me no more about him. He is dead,’ said Hester, drearily. ‘And I could not have married him, Mr. Hungerford, for he was very poor, and I would never be a mill-stone round his neck. There, now you know all . . . It is over! but I can never again love anyone quite in the same way; never.’

Hungerford sprang from the bench with a quick movement, so hasty it startled the girl. He almost knocked over the child, who was standing transfixed staring at them both a little way off, holding her

hoop; and, hardly heeding her, began to walk up and down the grass with long strides, his head bent. Louisa, having scrambled on her legs again, stood apparently meditating on her injured dignity. Then, finding this affront horrible, albeit she was unhurt, uplifted her voice in a succession of short squeals, though Hester had flown to console her.

After some minutes, the child being hushed again, Hungerford returned, walking determinedly up to where Hester again sat in resignation on the bench.

‘I was too impulsive—forgive me. Old as I am, I ought to know better,’ he said, in his clear, pleasing voice, though with effort.

Poor Hester, who had grown meek during many humiliations these past months, her old pride and courage having given place to a gentle melancholy, felt almost abashed at having so

moved a man of his years and position.

‘Oh! Mr. Hungerford,’ she murmured, ‘perhaps I should have told you before, when you spoke first; but—I could not!’

‘Why should you, child? You are wonderfully, innocently honest. I only wish it may last. It was my own fault for asking—there is *always* a some one first’ (he laughed rather bitterly); ‘it begins in the nurse’s arms, I believe. And, though disappointed for a minute, now on the whole I am rather glad it is so in this case. You will not expect too much from me either, Hester—love is not the whole of life to a man once he is past forty. Yes; we may live all the more happily together for this.’

‘But you are speaking as if you still wished me to marry you, Mr. Hungerford,’ cried Hester, her eyes upraised in soft bewilderment, her lips nervously parted.

‘Yes; I do. You told me of the only

shadow upon our future; if your mind was not such a white chamber, it would not be visible. What you said, is no obstacle to me. I look on you as my promised wife.'

As he spoke with a clear, commanding ring, his blue eyes lit as with pale summer lightning, his whole expression showering benignant, pitying fondness on penniless Hester, her young heart swelled with sudden gratitude. She had almost forgotten anyone had ever thought her lovely; that she had been admired and beloved and envied.

Mark Hungerford was standing quite straight, for once, and looked much younger, almost handsome, without his stoop as of a life-weary student. His hat hid his bald forehead; but even seeing it now, Hester, no longer associating his demands with love, would only have remembered the rare gifts of brain of the

scholar, the often passionate eloquence with which—whether discoursing lately of sciences, of arts, on many of which topics he had new and marvellously clever theories of his own, or on any other subject that had caught his fancy—he had attracted this young disciple's wondering gaze, and found in the admiration of those lovely eyes the sweetest praise he had known for long years.

And so, the girl thought, here was indeed a protector, a kindly guide and wise friend for her in life. One who offered so much—asked so little. Ought she not to be glad of such a safe harbour after being storm-tossed, though she might never reach the Blest Isles she had once longed for, like all young mariners setting out on life's ocean?

‘I feel so old,—quite withered. Life can hold nothing worse, nothing so good, as I have already known.’

The thoughts darted like light-beams from her brain as if out into the empty plains of the future, yet each succeeding former ones on well-known ways, as such rapid thoughts electrically do. *But yet she did not hurry to say yes.*

Louisa spoke up at that moment. Both had forgotten the child's presence. With a preternaturally sharp look on her wizened infantile face, she asked, staring hard,

‘Why do you cry ; are you naughty, Miss Armytage ? Cousin Mark is nasty, I don't like him ! I'll tell *mamma* you did talk to him, and she'll send you away . . . I heard her say she would, yesterday.’

Hester started guiltily at the accusation made with vindictive triumph ; but, recovering herself, said gently,

‘Run away and roll your hoop, dear. Yes—you must go, you know, when I really mean it.’

Left in peace for the moment, yet with the knowledge that now, should Mrs. Vignolles dismiss her from jealousy, no other situation, no help more than for the most friendless was left to her, Hester rose, and, tall, straight and slim, gazed full in Hungerford's face.

‘If you think I can really be of any comfort, any help, or—or gladness to you in life; to *you*, I mean, not thinking of myself! then I will marry you, Mr. Hungerford. And—I will try to do my duty, indeed.’

Hungerford smiled, almost laughed, with a flash of triumph. Taking her by both wrists, he drew her to sit down beside him on the bench.

‘Obedience shall be your first lesson. I want to look at my new possession,’ he said.

Hester sat humbly with her lovely eyes half-veiled, feeling no flush on her fair

cheeks nor beating of her heart; but an awed gratitude, and the vague fears of one who was very tired of trying to please, at thoughts of her new unknown responsibilities.

‘Child,’ said Hungerford, suddenly, ‘I wonder if you know that you are beautiful? I don’t believe you do.’

Hester raised her slow lids surprised. Then—then a recollection of some such words said to her—it seemed, oh! so long ago now!—did rush to her memory. *That* dyed her cheeks a sudden crimson. She looked down again to hide the salt drop or two that would rise; it seemed wicked, ungrateful of her to have remembered then. Her affianced husband did not understand her thought. He smiled, pleased at her innocent confusion.

‘Do you know that I believe somewhat—as much as I do in most theories—in the transmigration of souls, which Buddha

taught to millions of wise minds in the East. If so, what animal were you once, long cycles of ages ago, I wonder? Your eyes remind me so much of a setter—a silky-haired, faithful-eyed setter. Yes, you were one, I believe.'

'What—a dog!' cried Hester, in quick mortification.

'Why not?—better that than a tiger, as I most likely was—or before that a crocodile; perhaps we may each have been stones or plants in our time, too, while moving through all stages of existence,' said Hungerford, meditatively, passing into a mood of abstraction. He had almost forgotten in a few moments the girl so still beside him; he was another person. He often seemed to himself to be consciously two men in the same being. Now he was the scientist, the eager philosopher.

'I must go home, please. Mrs. Vignolles

will be angry,' murmured the girl at last.

Hungerford, the middle-aged lover, came back to himself with startled consciousness.

'Ah, yes! But, angry? I should like to see my cousin Emma presume to be angry with my promised little wife. I shall tell her myself—not a word, remember.' ('Such a treat will be rare,' he thought, smiling a little maliciously with secret amusement.) 'Good-bye, then; I must keep an engagement. You are walking back? Well, soon you shall have your own carriage, and—whatever else you like.'

He patted her shoulder, and went off, waving his hand twice with a kindly gesture. With him seemed to depart an atmosphere of ease, refinement, learning. Hester suddenly became conscious of her carefully-mended black gloves, old boots, and the fact that she was too ignorant to

teach more than the merest rudiments of learning to small children. But now all that, all fears of future sharp pinches of poverty, would harass her no more. She tried to kindle gladness in her heavy heart. 'No matter. It will come,' she thought.

Out broke the chill coy sun, in a gleam of noontide warmth. It was a good omen, surely.

CHAPTER XVI.

‘ I WILL SPEAK DAGGERS TO HER.’

‘ YES ; come in, Miss Hester Armytage. Miss Hester Armytage, *pray* come here ! Oh, I am surprised at you ; disgusted. I should like to hear what you have to say for yourself. This is pretty behaviour, miss. A girl of your age to go running after an elderly gentleman, as I find from my poor innocent babe that I foolishly trusted in the care of such a flirting, low-minded creature !’

Mrs. Vignolles was the angry speaker. She was seated in her pretty little boudoir,

the evening of the same day on which Hester had accepted Mr. Hungerford's proposal. The girl now stood arraigned like a culprit before her. In general the little widow had been by no means actually unkind, in Hester's opinion, towards her governess. She was certainly foolish in alternately spoiling or neglecting little Louisa, her favourite child, whilst she almost disliked her eldest, a boy at school. Yet though she had a most ingenious knack of filling up Hester's every spare moment by beseeching her to fulfil small duties and menial employments, which spared herself keeping another servant, Hester had in her simplicity believed much of this arose from a careless, slipshod, perhaps 'foreign' way of managing her household. But now Mrs. Vignolles' small affectations of speech, her *hein's* and *eh's*, and her would-be girlish frank artlessness of manner were all gone. Her cheeks were

crimson, her eyes darting sparks of angry fire, and her foot in its tight trim shoe was tapping the floor in a tattoo to relieve her rage.

At this moment the little widow was a scheming woman whose plans were being crossed, perhaps upset, and her rage was as that of any shrew.

Hester stood with drooped head before her, feeling like a willow in a blast, and in vain trying to assure herself she had done no real evil action.

‘As Mr. Hungerford is your cousin, Mrs. Vignolles, and one you think so highly of, why should you consider it wrong for him to talk to me once or twice out of doors? He was most kind,’ she murmured.

‘Once or twice! So you have met him *often*, then,’ cried the little woman, her voice rising almost to a shriek. ‘Utter depravity of conduct, that is what I call it. Kind indeed——! Oh, you may cry,

and look innocent; but mark my words, either you are a bad artful girl, or else you will repent the day Mark Hungerford made your acquaintance.'

'Mrs. Vignolles, you shall not speak evil of him to me. He is a good, noble-minded man; far above, far too clever for me.'

Hester made a step forward, her face alight with honest indignation, all the strength within her suddenly stirred. As her eyes met those of her mistress full, in contest for the first time, their look of utter candour and purity of high intention convinced the other even in her anger, and she became curiously silent for a moment or two. Then she said, in an altered voice,

'Perhaps after all you are too young and inexperienced to know what men really are. All I can say is, you make a terrible mistake. Even old men like my cousin are not to be trusted. And, though you

think him so good, Mark Hungerford has led, even lately, a very strange, and I am afraid a very bad sort of life.'

'That will do, my dear Emma. Pray leave my future wife either in ignorance as to my iniquities, or to hear them only from myself.'

Both women started. Mrs. Vignolles had thought herself safe from all intrusion in her boudoir. But her cousin Hungerford stood, with the heavy curtain that covered the door raised in his hand. How long he might have been there unseen, neither could say: while his smile was too quietly satirical to be pleasant, as even Hester felt.

He turned to the latter.

'Pray leave us, my dear, now; while I explain our little arrangement to my cousin.'

'Not at all. No one has a right but myself to give orders to my nursery-gover-

ness in *my* house !' cried Mrs. Vignolles, jumping up.

'She has left your situation, Emma, and has exchanged her mistress for—me. As to your house, excuse my bad memory. You have so often told me (as a cousin) of your attachment to it, in spite of the pressure of hard times, it was strange I should forget your ownership.'

He just gave one look at Mrs. Vignolles as he said this—no more ! and that, with one of his peculiarly courteous smiles. But Hester, who could not see the full expression of his glance where she stood, was nevertheless astonished to see its effect.

Mrs. Vignolles quailed ; turned pale, almost faint, apparently, and sat down ; gazing back feebly like a mesmerised subject under the eye of the stronger being who has subdued it.

Unreproved, the girl left the boudoir

timidly, and took refuge in her own bedroom.

There followed what seemed a long time to Hester, who sat with clasped hands imagining to herself vaguely some terrible scene and passionate warfare of words going on downstairs for her sake. Oh, she hated to give pain as to receive it, and felt as if she were somehow so wrong and unworthy to cause all this!

And it dawned upon her mind that Mrs. Vignolles, being a little widow who strove very hard to keep up a good appearance in society and yet make both ends meet, was perhaps more straitened in means than even Hester knew. Perhaps she had hoped for some help from her rich cousin, and, above all, to be asked to share his fortune. Perhaps she had grown attached to him—deeply attached! for she was so much nearer his own age, and had not

wrecked all her love in the death of her late spouse (as she hinted, speaking of deliverance from troubles, with sighing sprightliness).

Thinking of all this—seeming to understand her late enemy's springs of action—Hester could generously forgive the insults at which yet her blood still boiled. But now what should be done? Mrs. Vignolles would surely turn her forthwith out of the house. Perhaps Hester ought to begin to pack her trunk and bethink herself where she should find proper shelter for some time to come, being so friendless now.

Presently there was a tap at the door. Mrs. Vignolles entered, her manner being an odd mixture of attempted briskness with an apologetic air. Her eyelids were swollen and pink, and she avoided Hester's gaze as she came up, and, to the girl's great surprise, kissed her on the cheek.

‘Well, my dear, I congratulate you,’ she said, with a nervous little laugh. ‘Upon my word, I congratulate you. I never dreamed of such a thing, as of Mr. Hungerford actually *marrying* ! But, of course, all the family must be glad of it, though really he has waited so long we had nearly given up all hope. So you must forgive and forget what I said when I was a little flustered at first, my dear. It was only meant for a kindly warning to so young and pretty a girl ; and you know ’ (tapping her shoulder, playfully), ‘you had never told me it was all positively settled, you sly, little puss.’

Hester could not yet speak, with that Judas kiss still burning on her cheek. She *knew* that this woman hated her at this moment, for what she thought her artfully achieved prospects, and would gladly have robbed her of them. This was so natural that a cold manner and averted looks, if

not harder treatment, Hester would have made all allowance for as honest, however unkind. But to be stroking her shoulder at this moment dissembling fondness—How could she? how could she? Mrs. Vignolles, meeting Hester's clear eyes with their wondering gaze, turned away flushing, forcing an awkward laugh.

‘Don't apologise, my dear. I know all about it—Mark wished to have the pleasure of telling me himself. We have always been such great friends! and, indeed, I hope that, as he says, his marriage will make no difference between us in that respect . . . But how cold your room is; why, you have no fire! Pray ring and tell the housemaid to light one directly. I am sure you might always have had one if I had only known about it . . . And you will dine with me to-night, Miss Armytage—Hester I must begin to call you—to inaugurate your new dignities.’

But Hester shrinkingly pleaded to be left to her usual school-room routine and tea.

‘Well; just as you please—but, there are oyster patties and veal cutlets. I wonder which you would like sent up on your tray?’

Hester could not help marvelling at the wonderful transformation in her small daily life that her engagement had already brought. Certainly, neither mistress nor maids hitherto cared what came up on her tray.

‘Please don’t send me anything; indeed, I only care for bread and butter and tea as usual,’ she murmured, feeling as if a cutlet would choke her.

‘What simple tastes! But now, I have promised to bring you downstairs with me. Mark wishes to say good-bye to you; as he has an unlucky engagement that prevents his spending the evening as he

generally does with me—with *us*, I should say, now.'

Hungerford was waiting at the foot of the stairs, and felt an amused sense of triumph as he saw Hester descending like a meek sacrificial lamb, led by the bitter little priestess whose hand he had restrained from striking. He knew himself to be not the good man this young creature thought him, but all the best in him was roused by her helplessness and patience, her innocent clinging trustfulness. With a keen glance at both women, he satisfied himself that his cousin had obeyed his behests; he had conquered, what with threats of open warfare and adroit diplomacy, in that late most difficult battle, that with an angry woman who thinks herself supplanted by a rival; henceforth his promised bride was safe from her attacks. Rich men can truly buy much,

seeing he had sealed such a bargain for peace.

Taking Hester's trembling taper fingers in a clasp of his own that seemed to her all that was kind and protecting, he only said, while Mrs. Vignolles made a feint of retiring gracefully,

‘Good-bye for the present, dear child ; I shall leave you in my cousin's charge, who has always been such a kind friend of mine, she will be the same to you, I trust. I shall see you to-morrow. Good-evening, Emma—— Why, are you going away without saying a word to me?’

That was all. Thinking over it that night by the light of her newly-lit fire, Hester was most grateful to Mr. Hungerford (so she called him respectfully, even in thought) for his forbearance in not demanding from her, as yet, any of those outward tokens of affection she had feared

he might think it his right to claim. Boaz was very good and patient with his Ruth ; perhaps, after years, that former Ruth had grown even to love (in a manner) her rich old husband, at least to mingle infinite regard and real affection with gratitude, remembering only dreamily the dead lover of her youth. Ah ! but it must have taken years, long years, to forget——. And, if one could, *would* one forget ? Still Hester felt sure that Ruth had resolved to give her duty ; her whole duty in pressed-down measure ; as would she herself, God helping her to fulfil that same !

Weepingly, with almost reluctant sadness, the young girl's thoughts went creeping backwards from this small little London house of ease and oppression that was her Egyptian prison along the iron ways that had brought her hither from home. Home ! The long-homesick lonely girl remembered so lovingly that little house like

a complicated bird's nest, with all the odd heavens of its thatched roof over unexpected windows; the creepers on its walls; the tiny rood of Eden before its porch; above all the love within doors that had always greeted herself. Home—and the wide lake in front and the great mountains.

And Westcliff! its sea, and the Ladies' Bay, and the little grey church high up there on the cliff-top Oh, why remember it all now? Hester's heart was sore and faint within her at those sad, sweet memories, as one by one the past days, that were no more, came up before her mind.

Ah! if only her dead could have rested there! If Christopher, her love, could have been buried on that pleasant hill among his own people, and in hearing of the soft dirge of the waves below as he had wished . . .

For it was now some four months since Hester knew *Christopher Kenyon was dead!* —but all she knew was this. One evening, whilst she was fulfilling part of her manifold duties by building card-houses to amuse Louisa (whose pettish small hand loved demolishing them) during the half-hour the child was supposed to spend with her mother daily, Hester suddenly caught some words Mr. Hungerford said to the widow, and her heart stood still. Mark Hungerford was treated as ‘one of the family,’ said Mrs. Vignolles, and her cousin was welcome whenever he pleased to come. In those days he more often came, and, though he talked to his hostess, his eyes often watched the young governess and child in the background.

‘So I saw poor Christopher Kenyon’s death in the papers the other day,’ he said. ‘What did he die of?’

‘Oh, some sort of fever, so I heard,’

returned Mrs. Vignolles, with a careless enough air. 'He ought never to have gone out to those West-Indian islands, pestiferous places—none of your foreign climes for me any more.'

'Ha!—tired of it, Emma? Curious! the fit is strangely coming upon me now to roam. I have been too stay-at-home. Well; poor Kenyon—what a handsome family they all were!'

Hester contrived to coax Louisa away: and so slipped out of the room before she could hear more than the beginning of some confused but elaborately-worded sentences, by which Mrs. Vignolles sought to explain that under certain circumstances she would not object—nay, with an agreeable companion she would even *like*—to go 'abroad' again.

When Hester was once alone, her first agony of grief—later, her sleepless nights and days of secret sorrow—need not be de-

scribed. Whilst Kenyon was still on earth, there was always the faint hope that still they might one day meet, however aged both, and look each other in the face. But that was gone—oh, how great a blessing that mere possibility would now have seemed! And Hester was left, young, poor, and hopeless, alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

‘TO PART AND LIVE!’

To pass over a part of Hester's life, there came a spring evening, nearly two months after her engagement to Mr. Hungerford, when once more she stood at the old stile above her grandfather's former home, up in the lake country.

One little year had passed since, standing at that very spot, she had last seen Christopher Kenyon. It was the same spot, almost the same time of year—then it was afternoon, now it was a glorious evening.

Almost everything the same, the sheep nibbling the grass, the brown roof of the Nest peeping through the trees, the lake shimmering a tender grey veiled by mists. Only *he* was dead ; and Hester was married ! Rich Boaz had been kind to Ruth, and had brought her here, at her own earnest request, that she might say good-bye to her loved old haunts, before going to travel on the Continent with him for the rest of the year. Mark Hungerford had done more. Taking a fancy to the cottage, he had bought it after arrival, as it was still for sale, and he being a rich man could gratify all his whims. And he had given her old home and its little domain of garden, shrubbery, and meadow as a marriage gift to his young wife. Hester was most grateful. She was glad to have seen the Nest again—but, oh, the pain of it !

‘No matter. It is for the last time,’

said the girl low to herself now. She was no longer poorly dressed. During the late weeks, indeed ever since she had promised to marry Hungerford, she had been lapped in ease, nay! luxuries; daily waited on with the little attentions that are so easily given and received by rich people, but to which she had not yet become again wholly familiar. Hester wore a soft white India muslin now; simple enough but trimmed with very costly lace. Her head was bare, though it was growing late and the dew falling. Her bright chestnut hair broke from restraint into tiny curls and waves over her temples and behind her ears, and so softened the rather melancholy expression of her face. She was again fair to see as at Westcliff, for even her past year of comparative hardship could not dim the soft whiteness and rosy glory of her complexion and the fresh ruby of her lips at that happy age. The

poor governess's black gowns cast aside, her beauty queened it again in befitting dress. And yet, looking closely at her, one might guess Hester felt not one but several years older in mind. The little dimple on her left cheek was no more made visible by a smile. The small spirit of humour that used to laugh out of the corners of her deep grey eyes seemed fled; and her lips no longer quivered with every passing emotion, but were calm set as of one gently, yet only resignedly content.

A sigh rose from the depths of Hester's heart. She pressed her soft hands on the old wooden bar that had known her touch so often, and tried to still the risings of regretful feelings by that clasp. The very grass and flowers she was treading on were the same, it seemed, as of old; the bramble-trails, the dog-roses, and hawthorn

bushes growing thick and tall around the spot; the hour was well-nigh the same; the distant calls of children, the bark of a village dog far off heard so distinctly in the stillness of the evening—— All, all was the same, only the one being wanting—and that meant *everything*!

Several evenings already, Hester had thus stood here. To tell truth, here she had stolen alone each day since they had come. She had never yet been disturbed in these minutes devoted to the now sacred memory of the dead. Now, however, she suddenly started, and listened.

There was a step coming through the bushes behind the stile, a firm step, along the rocky bed of the path, though the comer as yet was hidden. Hester was half frightened; so few persons ever passed by there in the year. She drew herself

up, listening intently, with the look of a startled deer, her white dress showing ghostly in the summer twilight, and the growing shadows of the secluded place. It was thus a man, coming from among the hawthorn bushes close by, saw her—stopped short, gazed, with a stifled exclamation as of joy strangled by quick disbelief. But Hester was gazing too, with wide eyes and blanched face—Another moment—then a cry of ‘Christopher! Christopher!’ came from her parted lips. And, with an answering utterance of her name, the man rushed forward, caught her in his arms, and was almost weeping in his delirious ecstasy.

‘I have come back, you see—come back as we two agreed, if ever things grew brighter; and they *are* brighter! Then to find you here, waiting for me, as it seems, my Hester. Oh, this is happiness, indeed!’

His kisses were so quick and close upon her face, her lips, her eyes, Hester could hardly speak, if even her fainting heart had permitted her. But then, with a strong effort, she freed herself.

‘Don’t, don’t! Stand away, Christopher . . . Don’t touch me again—*I am married!*’

‘My God——!’

The blow was so great, so sudden, that Kenyon was stunned. He stood still, staring at Hester, with his dark eyes fixed.

Even in that brief time she could think to herself how handsome he was, with his finely-formed features, where emotion seemed arrested, and his eyes aglow with the eager fire she knew so well of old, but now intensified.

Then his lips quivered, and he began to laugh very low, in a strange way.

‘Ha, ha! so you are married! . . . Yes, I can see the sign, the golden first link of your fetters, Hester.’ (The girl wore an unusually heavy marriage ring indeed, kept on her slight finger by another of flashing brilliants.) ‘May I still call you Hester, I wonder?’ he went on. ‘Ha, ha, ha! To come back, the first hour I could start, after being left a little income—slender, certainly, but still enough for two, as I hoped—to hasten here to your home, and find you alone at this stile as we parted, but—*married!* They are grimly humorous, these sudden changes in life.’

‘Oh, Kit, *don’t!*’

Kenyon was silenced at that cry from the woman’s soul. His own mood changed at once. Hester’s lightest word was all-powerful with him still.

In a few broken sentences she told him all, with straining gaze and clasped hands,

the expression of her white young face saying all that failed when her voice was mute.

‘And so he is rich,’ returned Christopher, looking as hard away over the lake as if his future lay far behind the mountains. ‘Well, my story is only that it was my cousin Christopher, my old uncle’s second son, who died—not myself, as you see.’ (Ah! Hester tightened her lips in self-reproach. Had she only had the courage to have asked Mrs. Vignolles for particulars! but she thought then to endure that cold gaze, prying into the secret of her love, would have been impossible.) ‘He had once been left a small fortune by a relation of ours,’ went on Kit, ‘which, in case of his death without children, was to pass to me. He had gone to the West-Indies on a trip for his health merely. It took some time before the news reached me at Aden; more before I could get back.

And so you thought me dead—not knowing Christopher was our chief family name. Well, I begin to think it was a mistake I am alive instead of him after all—I do indeed, Hester.'

He spoke very gently, but with a deadly quietness. Hester would far rather he had even wept. But she was dry-eyed herself; her tears seemed all spent long ago.

Then, recovering himself, Christopher roused a little and said to her,

'He is kind to you, at least . . . he must be when he brought you here to please you. I heard in the village that a rich man had taken the cottage for a fortnight, and brought his servants and horses and that he had a young wife. But I little thought—— Oh, I shall at least see you again sometimes—no! as often as we can! Otherwise it would be too terrible.'

‘No, no; never again. Promise me never to try, Christopher!’ she cried, with dilated eyes. ‘I should die with pain if we were to meet—often. No, no; never again! Oh, believe me, it is far, far better not.’

Christopher stepped closer to her, and answered slowly, with a face almost as white as her own,

‘Very well, then; as you wish. But, Hester, give me one last kiss. Even Jamie in “Auld Robin Gray” had that, you know.’

‘No, no, no! You did kiss me at first, Christopher, before I told you. Ah! . . . there *he* is! down there by the lake. He expects me and I dare not meet him just yet. Oh, dear, dear Christopher, good-bye. May God bless you.’

Covering her face with both hands, Hester fled down a small, dry, winter water-course among the trees, skirting the

meadow : a secret track known to her from childhood. She was out of sight, bending among the branches, in a few minutes.

Christopher stood there wearily, feeling as if a weight of lead within his body kept him from stirring.

‘Where have you been, Hester? I have finished my after-dinner cigar long ago, and began wondering what on earth had become of you,’ said Mark Hungerford, some time later, in a voice in which fretfulness and kindliness mingled. ‘Look here, little woman,’ he went on, gazing round restlessly at lake, mountains, and the cottage close by. ‘I have begun to get tired of this place. A fit of roving sometimes comes over me when I must have change, constant change. Should you mind leaving this to-morrow, eh?’

‘ I ? oh, no—indeed, I should like change, too, anywhere.’

‘ What, like myself?’ said her husband, with a keen, surprised glance. ‘ Well, evidently we are well mated, my dear.’

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





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